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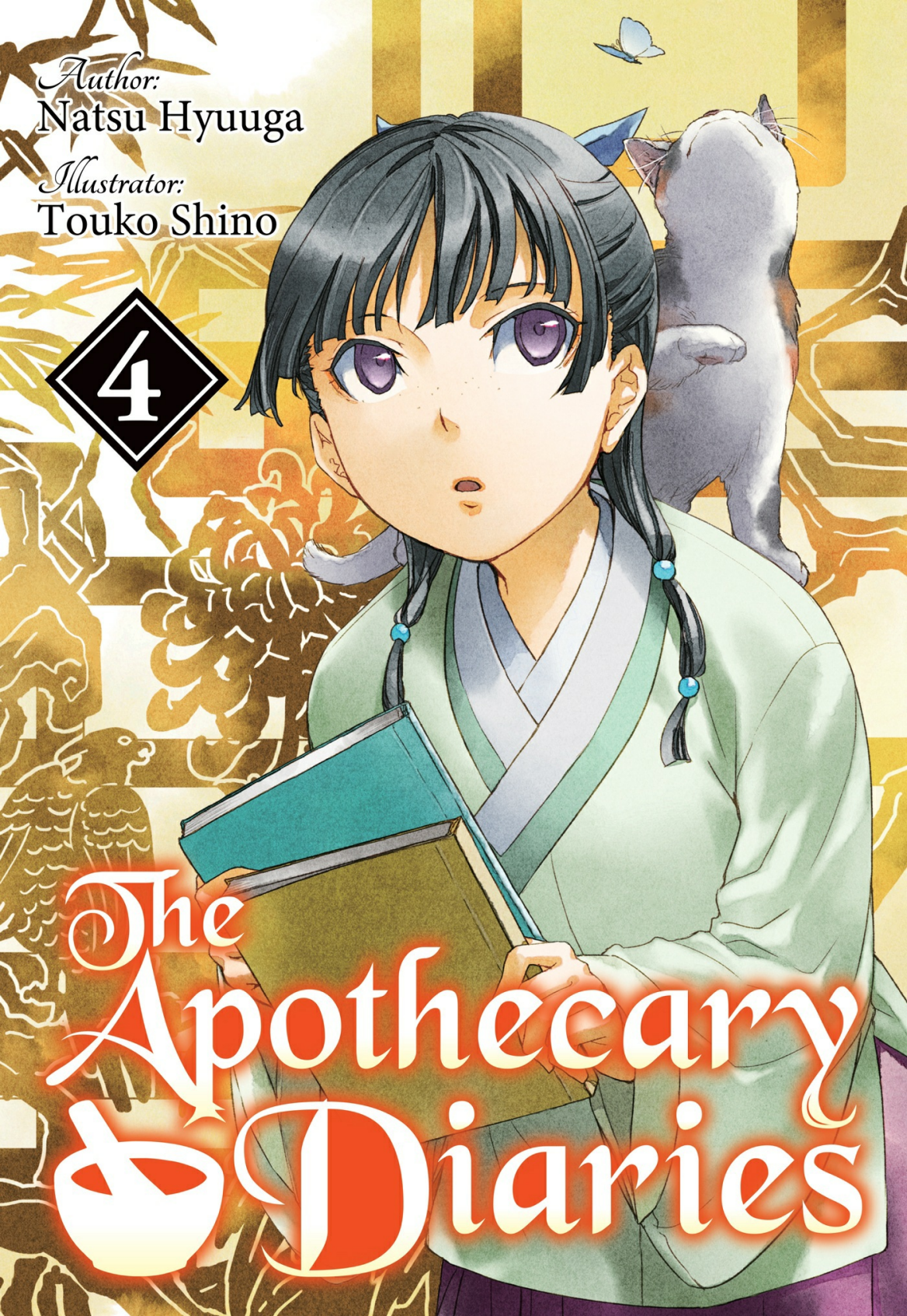

The Apothecary Diaries

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"You don't mind if I touch your belly?"
Maomao ran her fingers gently along Gyokuyou's belly.

She opened a drawer that contained an herbal remedy. Suddenly she found Maomao curled around her ankles. She tried to nudge the kitten out of the way in annoyance, but the cat ran her claws along Maomao's skirt.
"Stop, you'll tear it!"

"Give it back!"
Consort Lishu
tore at the woman's collar, grabbing the mirror back.

"We have to make sure it tastes right, don't we?"
Maomao scooped up a bit of the cold ice treat and put it in Xiaolan's mouth.

When Maomao had Jinshi with his back to the wall, she reached out slowly.
"Let me see it."
For a moment, she didn't say anything.
His perfect jewel of a face now had a wound, mended with stitches, running diagonally down the right cheek. It was more than just a superficial scratch; something had torn through the flesh.

The Apothecary Diaries

Introduction

A Method to the Mysteries?

Mystery fans love *The Apothecary Diaries*. In volume 4, our protagonist, Maomao, realizes to her chagrin that there's something else behind the mysteries she's encountered in the rear palace. Our redoubtable food taster has cracked a lot of cases, and things are finally reaching their climax—or so she thinks, when she suddenly finds herself kidnapped!

Then there's the beautiful eunuch, Jinshi, who also discovers some new twists. What will happen to them both?!

Welcome to the latest page-turning volume. Interest guaranteed!

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Prologue

Mother was smiling brightly.

That meant *she* should smile too. She'd learned that much.

Mother was angry at Father.

That meant she should frown like Mother was doing. She'd learned that much.

Mother was disciplining one of the ladies-in-waiting.

That meant she should simply stand by and not do anything. She knew that.

Then Mother was looking at her, watching her very, very closely, and there was nothing she could do but rise to the challenge. Laugh when her mother laughed, grieve when she grieved.

Then Mother wouldn't be angry. A smile would come over her face, and she would grow no uglier.

When she was about five years old, rouge was applied to her lips; by the time she was ten, face-whitening powder was put on her cheeks. Her eyebrows were plucked out and false ones drawn on, and then she felt like she was wearing a mask. It was as if there were invisible strings connected to her arms and legs, and Mother was pulling them. She was hemmed in on every side.

She could accept that. She was perfectly willing to be a puppet all her life.

But that was a mistake.

It didn't matter if she wore a mask, if she made herself a puppet: Mother kept getting uglier and uglier. She discovered it was impossible to stop it.

Ah: it had all been for nothing.

But by the time she realized that, it was too late. Too late to do anything at all.

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Chapter 1: The Bath

"I wonder if there's anywhere I can get a decent job," Xiaolan said as she sorted the laundry in the basket. They were in the usual laundry area, and one of the eunuchs had given her a load of dry clothes. "Say, Maomao, you wouldn't happen to have any connections, would you?"

Xiaolan was into the last six months of her contract. Normally it was around this time that the families of palace women found potential marriages for them, or else the women found matches for themselves. Alternatively, a higher-ranking palace woman or consort who particularly liked them might ask for them to be kept on at the rear palace.

"Connections, huh?" Maomao said. Sure, she had connections. Such as they were. The Verdigris House was always looking for hardworking, attractive young women. Especially ones as good-natured as Xiaolan.

Maomao put a hand to her chin and looked at Xiaolan. She still had traces of baby fat, but she had a good face. And there were certain men who would appreciate the way she occasionally stumbled over her words. Most of all, though, she was earnest, and that would get her a long way. The old madam said girls like that were easy to train up, and she frequently bought them from the procurers—in other words, the traffickers.

Maomao quailed at the thought, though. "If you absolutely, positively can't find any other job, then I'll make some introductions." To be perfectly honest, though, she didn't want to.

"What? You'd really do that for me?!" Xiaolan leaned toward Maomao, her eyes sparkling. Maomao looked away.

I'm afraid she's getting her hopes up...

In Maomao's mind, she was a last resort. Her own firsthand knowledge of the pleasure quarter and the courtesans within it prevented her from being able to recommend it wholeheartedly as an occupation. The Verdigris House, which was essentially Maomao's own home, was one of the brothels that treated its women relatively well, but by and large the pleasure quarter was not a place where one could hope to work—and survive—into old age.

Chronic sleep deprivation and malnutrition, along with whatever diseases the customers might be carrying, conspired to end many a courtesan's life early. Then there were the ones who tried and failed to cut ties with the place, and subsequently found themselves stuffed in a bamboo mat and pitched into the river as an example to others.

Xiaolan had been sold into the rear palace by her parents; when she left, it would be up to her to make her own way. It was understandable how that might produce some anxiety—or drive her to start asking around about "connections."

Am I sure I don't have anything better? Maomao asked herself.

It crossed her mind to recommend her to Jinshi, but then she shook her head. Introducing her to him would only get Xiaolan caught up in who knew what kind of trouble.

Maybe the quack doctor, then. She crossed her arms and grunted—and then suddenly a face appeared.

"What's up?" The speaker was a tall young woman with a unique hairdo and a distinctly non-courtly speaking style. Shisui.

"Oh, Shisui! Say, you wouldn't happen to know a good place to work, would you?"

They say a drowning woman will clutch at any straw, and Xiaolan was doing exactly that. Shisui was only a maid herself, meaning her position was very similar to Xiaolan's. The chances of getting a useful lead from her were slim indeed—but Shisui said something unexpected.

"You know, I think I just might."

"What? Really?" Xiaolan all but grabbed onto Shisui. The other girl glanced aside and pointed toward the center of the rear palace's southern quarter, where a large, low building stood. Maomao was well acquainted with it: it was the great bathhouse. It had been built during the expansion of the rear palace, in imitation of the harems of a nation far to the west.

"Well, it's not so much that I know one right now. But I think I know how we can get one," Shisui said, and grinned.

The building was huge, the bathing area in general big enough for a thousand people, with a tub large enough for a hundred.

There were three main bathing areas: a small chamber with an attached outdoor bath for the consorts, a second, larger bath where the trio was

standing now, and the third, biggest bath, which the maids usually just took quick dips in.

With a population as dense as that of the rear palace, it was all too easy for an illness to turn into an epidemic, so sanitation was paramount. This bath was part of maintaining that cleanliness.

Out in the wider world, a "bath" usually meant simply washing one's body. One didn't get in a tub, but simply filled a bucket with water and washed with it, or otherwise wiped oneself down with a wet rag. In the pleasure quarter where Maomao had grown up, bathing in tubs was the norm, but many of the women who served at the rear palace didn't even know how to use them when they first arrived. Filling a tub with hot water was just that much of a luxury.

In winter, palace women were expected to bathe once every five days; once every other day in summer. Washing away dust and body odor was all part and parcel, Maomao thought, of making life at the rear palace pleasant. It was also a chance to see if any of the consorts were subjecting the serving women to corporal punishment. It was much like how at the Verdigris House, the madam had kept a close eye on the women to make sure none of the customers were abusing them and damaging the merchandise.

The bathhouse could itself be a vector for spreading illness, but in this garden of women, sexually transmitted diseases were rare, and most of the inhabitants were young and healthy, so serious contamination was unusual.

"I knew we'd have the place to ourselves this time of day!" Shisui said. It was still light out, and few other palace women were there.

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“But why the bathhouse?” Xiaolan asked. She had a washcloth in her hand and was wearing only a bathing apron, which left the curves of her body clearly visible—not that there were very many of them.

“You’ll find out.” Shisui was dressed the same way. Her body was awfully developed, though, compared to how youthful her face looked. Her chest was large enough to make Maomao’s fingers flex unconsciously. Apparently Shisui dressed to hide her proportions.

Shisui herself, meanwhile, grinned broadly and jumped into the bath.

“Hey! You have to rinse first! They’ll get mad at you!” Xiaolan cried.

“Yipes! It’s hot!” Shisui yelped even as she pulled off her apron. Her skin was turning red where she’d plunged in. Maomao grabbed a bucket and brought over some water from the cold-water bath.

Xiaolan sniffed, annoyed. “Hmph. Have you never bathed at this time of day?”

The eunuchs only filled the tubs once a day, so they started with extremely hot water, and over time, it cooled down until it was the perfect temperature. During the warm season like this, therefore, not many people were eager to hop in the bath immediately after it was filled. But later on it got crowded—so those who did wish to take an early bath were allowed in. That was why Maomao and the others could be there now.

“Hee hee. I always come a little later,” Shisui said.

Maomao mixed cold and hot water in her bucket, then started to wet herself down. She used some shampoo she’d swiped from the medical office; as it bubbled, she wetted her hair and worked her fingers carefully along her scalp.

“Let me have some of that, Maomao!” Shisui said and stuck out her hand. Maomao obligingly poured a bit of the shampoo from its bottle into her palm. Her own head still covered in suds, Maomao poured some of the water from the bucket over Xiaolan’s head and washed her hair with the shampoo as well.

“It stings my eyes,” Xiaolan said.

“Then close them.”

She worked her fingers over Xiaolan’s scalp, getting a good lather going, then washed the bubbles away with more water. Xiaolan shook her head like a dog shaking itself dry, flinging suds in Maomao’s face. “I’m not a big fan of baths,” she said.

“No? But they feel good,” Shisui said.

“I agree.” Maomao sought out a comparatively cool place in the tub and dipped her toes into the water. Concerned that the heat would go to her head, she put more cold water in her bucket and used it to keep her face cool as she soaked.

Shisui slid into the tub like Maomao, while Xiaolan got in the cold bath. She was probably more comfortable there; farming villages like her hometown usually didn’t have a custom of bathing in hot water.

Xiaolan rested her arm on the edge of the tub and looked over at the other girls. “How is this supposed to be a ‘connection’ to anything?”

“Just look over there.” Shisui pointed to the outdoor bath, usually the abode of the more important women of the rear palace—consorts and higher-ranking ladies-in-waiting. It was attached to the small chamber that was reserved for the consorts’ use.

“What’s over there?” Xiaolan asked.

Shisui got up, took Xiaolan by the arm, and dragged her outside. She guided her over to a stone platform beside the outdoor bath.

“H-Hold on, are we even allowed to be out here?” Xiaolan asked, a little panicked, but Shisui only grinned, stood by the platform, and tied a hand towel around her head.

Well, now... Maomao thought. She thought she had a pretty good idea of what Shisui had in mind. She joined the others by the platform and tied a towel around Xiaolan’s head. Xiaolan still looked confused, but soon two women approached them.

“New here?” one of them asked. From her haughty tone, it was easy to guess she must be a consort.

Shisui just smiled and said, “Yes, ma’am.”

Then the consort laid down on the stone platform as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The other woman, evidently her lady-in-waiting, produced a bottle of perfume oil.

“Good and firm, please,” the consort said.

“You’ve got it!” Shisui replied, taking the perfume oil and slowly pouring it over the consort’s shoulders.

“Mmm... A little to the right,” the woman said languorously. Her lady-in-waiting stood by, looking bored.

Kind of doubt she’s been with the Emperor, then, Maomao thought, taking

some of the oil and rubbing it into the woman's legs and feet, trying her best to imitate Shisui. Xiaolan did likewise.

When a woman had been the Emperor's bedmate, she would become the target of harassment from the other consorts and palace women. She would learn to be vigilant—no one in that position would let an unknown serving girl give her a massage. This woman, though, was flopped on the table like an octopus. She had a certain beauty, as all consorts must, but Maomao couldn't help noticing that her skin looked a bit abused; there were marks where her fine hair had been plucked.

That really bugs me.

How could it not, Maomao having been raised in the pleasure quarter? On impulse, she ducked back into the building, looking for something.

"What's that?" Xiaolan asked quietly when she came back. Maomao was holding a thread about sixty centimeters long.

"You'll see," Maomao said. Then she struck up a conversation with the consort's lady-in-waiting. The other woman looked a little suspicious, but listened. At length, she sat down on the edge of the stone platform and held out her arm. Maomao ran the thread along it. The surface of the thread caught her hair and pulled it out.

"It doesn't hurt too much?" Maomao asked.

"It's pretty uncomfortable, but it's sure better than a dull razor." The other woman seemed like a decent lady-in-waiting. Typically, this sort of thing was done after a good, thorough cleaning, but the women looked like they had already been in the bath, so it should be fine.

"I'll stop if it seems to be irritating your skin," Maomao said. She decided to start with just one arm. After carefully removing all the hair, she doused the limb generously in perfume oil. It was a good perfume, modestly scented; it didn't assault the nose.

"Hmm, well, let's see how it goes for now. When will you be around next?" the lady-in-waiting asked with a glance at her mistress, who was melting on the stone table.

"When would you like?"

"Say the day after next, maybe?"

Shisui grinned at that. Xiaolan was working on the woman's thighs, still not quite sure what was going on.

I see what she's going for, Maomao thought. If they didn't have

connections, they could just make some. The bathhouse was an important venue, a place where they could meet the consorts, whom they could never normally get close to.

By the time the satisfied consort and her attendant left, the next customer for their massage service was already waiting.

Playing bathhouse attendant was tiring work. It took a lot of effort to massage someone's entire body. It wouldn't have been so bad doing just one person, but before they knew it, there was a line.

They eventually learned that the lady who used to give massages here had recently reached the end of her contract. One of the middle consorts had taken a liking to her, and now she was employed in the woman's family home.

In the wider world, bathhouse attendants were often treated as prostitutes, but there were only women here, so it wasn't an issue. However, perhaps because of the association, or perhaps simply because it was physical labor, many of the palace women didn't like doing this job. So it was that Maomao, Shisui, and Xiaolan became the go-to women for massages. It meant that much more work to do—Maomao and the others were, after all, *supposed* to be handling laundry—but it brought its benefits.

"Here, have this. It isn't much, but take it," a lady-in-waiting said as she got out of the bath, discreetly passing them a small fabric pouch. This didn't happen every time, of course. This particular woman seemed to have appreciated the hair removal, that was all. When they peeked inside, they found candy. That set Xiaolan's eyes sparkling, and she promptly popped a piece into her mouth. "Ahh, bliss..."

So she could achieve bliss just by having something sweet to eat. Lucky girl.

The three of them had finished their work in the baths and were perched on the railing out front, cooling off. The sun was still high in the sky; it was a bit early for dinner. Other women were rushing around, trying to finish their work before sundown. The ones tasked with cooking the food looked especially busy.

Maomao was something of a special case, but for Xiaolan and Shisui, the compromise of getting to the bath early was having more work left to do later. They were enjoying a few precious moments of relaxation before they

got back to their jobs.

"I guess it's not that easy to make connections," Xiaolan said, rolling the candy around in her mouth. Maybe she'd been expecting that they would be up to their ears in job offers by now.

"Oh, it's not so bad," Shisui said. "When your contract is about to run out, just find one of the consorts who likes you all right and whisper in her ear. Tell her your service will be ending soon."

"I hope it'll work..."

"Even if she doesn't take you on personally, you might at least be able to get your contract extended. And even if that doesn't happen..." Shisui took something from the folds of her robe: a comb missing several teeth. Despite the imperfection, it was a turtle-shell piece that must have been worth a fair bit of money. "...You can always turn something like this into cash!"

"Hoh!" *Very clever*, Maomao thought. She didn't much like sweet things and had given her candy to Xiaolan. *And speaking of clever...*

The word also described the consort Maomao served. Maomao was going to the baths once every two days, and she always seemed to be in the company of Shisui and Xiaolan. Many women might have frowned on her paying so much attention to other consorts. Consort Gyokuyou, however, simply said: "Oh? You hear lots of interesting things in a place like that. Let me know what you learn." She was unflappable.

It was true; consorts and ladies-in-waiting often spoke offhandedly about things of great interest when they were really relaxed. Perhaps they didn't realize that Maomao was herself a lady-in-waiting at the Jade Pavilion, or maybe the steam from the hot baths obscured her enough that it was hard to tell. Whatever the case, people spoke to her of their families' business situations, the behind-the-scenes goings-on of other consorts, and other secrets.

There were rumors about Consort Gyokuyou too. Maomao realized that the sharpest consorts had guessed she was pregnant long ago, and all the talk now was about whether it would be a boy or girl and when it would be born. A handful of gossip held that Consort Lihua might be pregnant as well; Maomao was unsettled to realize people were already thinking along those lines.

But there were still other rumors. Such as one that said perhaps Consort Loulan was with child. She'd been known for her gaudy outfits ever since she

got to the rear palace, but recently she'd started to favor billowing clothes and seemed to avoid going outside, both of which fueled the stories.

Hmmm...

Consort Loulan had arrived at the beginning of this year, and they were already at the end of the eighth month, going into the ninth. It was unthinkable that His Majesty would have failed to visit Loulan, a high consort who had arrived with such fanfare. If the rumors were true, it would mean that three of the four upper consorts were pregnant. Happy news? Or tidings of trouble? Either way, it was an unsettling prospect.

And there was yet another interesting story going around...

"I thought making eunuchs wasn't allowed anymore."

Maomao knew what Xiaolan was getting at. Alongside the new palace ladies who had been taken on recently, the number of eunuchs had increased as well, but the creation of new eunuchs was supposed to have been outlawed when the current Emperor had taken the throne.

"They're former slaves," Shisui said blandly. Slavery was also supposed to have been outlawed; these men probably hadn't been slaves in Maomao's country. Among the tribes were some who captured people from the surrounding nations, castrated them, and made them slaves. These new arrivals must have either run away or been rescued.

"They say there's thirty of them. With a number that big, there must have been a pretty serious move against the tribes."

When slaves escaped, there was usually some impetus like that behind it. Maomao recalled there'd been some issue with such an expedition the year before; maybe the men had been rescued then. Shisui might look and sound youthful, and she might have a strange predilection for bugs, but she could be surprisingly worldly.

"That's rough," Xiaolan remarked.

"You said it," Shisui replied. They sounded as if it hardly concerned them. Then again, it hardly did.

Then Xiaolan said, "You know, they say one of the eunuchs is awfully cool. I'd sure like to get a look at him."

That sounded all too familiar to Maomao, who scowled.

"We're talking about a eunuch, remember. Still interested?" Shisui asked.

"But cool is cool, right? Ooh, maybe he'll be assigned to bring the water

for the baths!" Xiaolan's eyes were positively sparkling. Evidently it didn't matter to her whether this man had that most important of possessions or not. She was still so young. "I'm still interested," Xiaolan added. "Even if he isn't as great as Master Jinshi."

Maomao almost fell clean off the railing she was leaning against.

"You okay?" Xiaolan asked, peering at her. Maomao brushed off her skirt and straightened up again, pretending it was nothing. "Come to think of it, Maomao, you and Master Jinshi are always—"

"—running errands *for the consort*, yes." Maomao said forcefully. As if to communicate: *nothing more and nothing less.*

Unconsciously, she brushed at her skirt with her left hand. It was like she could still feel the frog she'd accidentally grabbed hold of. *Yeah, the frog. The frog*, she kept repeating, trying to calm herself down.

She hadn't yet seen Jinshi since they'd returned from the hunting expedition. She assumed he would soon be coming to the Jade Pavilion on his routine rounds, and she wasn't really looking forward to it. She was still repeating *the frog, the frog* to herself with the intensity of a monk reciting a sutra when two familiar faces entered the bath: an uneasy-looking young woman, and a palace lady attending her. The young woman had a cute face, but at the moment her brow was knitted in distress.

Is that...Consort Lishu?

Yes, and her chief lady-in-waiting. Maomao watched them, wondering what they were doing there.

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Chapter 2: Seki-u

I feel like I'm being...stared at, Maomao thought. By whom? The three people in front of her.

Today's snack was steamed buns. Some of them contained red bean paste, but others were plain, with no filling, and Maomao, who wasn't very fond of sweet things, preferred those. Instead of the bean paste, she liked to eat them with leftover stewed vegetables.

In the Jade Pavilion, the ladies-in-waiting took their breaks in turns. Maomao was often on break at the same time as Hongniang or Yinghua, and recently she'd often simply been away from the pavilion entirely, but now she found herself on break with the three new girls.

To be quite honest, she was uncomfortable. Maomao wasn't very good with people to begin with; it was a full month after the new girls had arrived, and she had only just started to remember their names. The three of them looked very similar. At first Maomao thought it might simply be because they shared a hometown—but in fact, they were sisters.

Haku-u, Koku-u, and Seki-u, she repeated to herself. The names themselves weren't hard to remember. They simply meant White Feather, Black Feather, and Red Feather. Remembering which of the girls was which—that was the tricky part. She'd already mixed them up several times, until in exasperation the girls had each taken to wearing a hairband that matched the color of their names (somewhat as the special envoys had done), whereupon Maomao was finally able to remember who was who.

They weren't triplets, but had each been born in successive years: Haku-u was the oldest, followed by Koku-u and then Seki-u. They had good looks, as befitted ladies-in-waiting to an upper consort; their flowing eyebrows suggested they had been drawn in with charcoal. They all had lovely, almond-shaped eyes, but it was the middle girl, Koku-u, who struck Maomao as the strongest of spirit.

"Not going to have any?" Maomao asked. She'd already sat down and started in on one of the steamed buns. Tea had been waiting; Guiyuan, who

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had been on break just before them, had prepared it for them. The leaves had already been steeped before, but it was still quite tasty.

"Sure..." The oldest sister, Haku-u, sat down, followed by Koku-u and then Seki-u.

None of them said anything. Maomao didn't mind silence as such, but it made her feel funny to have people watch her eating. *Maybe there's something they want to say.* If there was, she wished they would go ahead and say it. Maomao wasn't interested in dragging it out of them. With superiors it was one thing, but when dealing with colleagues, she wasn't going to go bending over backward on behalf of people she felt no special affection for.

They ended up eating their buns in silence. Maybe the new girls felt they couldn't say anything if Maomao didn't speak first. They should have just chatted among themselves, not minding her, Maomao thought.

She finished her snack and washed it down with the rest of her tea. Haku-u, the young woman with the white hairband, looked at Maomao and finally spoke: "I have a question. If you don't mind." Her speech was deliberate and careful. Maomao had heard that Seki-u, the youngest, was her own age, which meant Haku-u must have been about twenty this year. That would make her as old as Gyokuyou and older than Yinghua and the others; maybe that explained how composed she was. "How, if I may ask, did you come to serve in the Jade Pavilion?"

"How"?

Well, there hadn't been enough hands at the Jade Pavilion, and Jinshi had pressed her into service as a food taster at what he found to be a convenient moment. Maomao assumed Yinghua or one of the others had told the new girls at least that much at some point.

"Yes, we know that," Haku-u said. "But that doesn't actually explain anything. Gyokuyou isn't quick to trust anyone, but she trusts you. Why?" She grimaced as she said *Gyokuyou*, with no title or honorific.

I see, Maomao thought. Maybe Haku-u felt close to Gyokuyou, being the same age. It shouldn't have been surprising if she was suspicious of an unknown person getting close to the consort. "I'm really only a food taster. If someone were to try to poison Consort Gyokuyou, I would be the one to suffer the consequences. I ask that you view me in terms of that role."

It was the honest answer. There was no particular need to tell her about

the incident of the toxic face powder that had led to Maomao's introduction to Gyokuyou.

"They said you don't mince words. Turns out it's true."

"Thank you." Maomao wasn't sure whether that was actually a compliment, but she bowed her head just the same. Haku-u might have been a newcomer, but she did outrank Maomao, after all.

"I also hear you have a lot of outside friends, but I hope you won't spend too much time socializing. My sisters and I are trying to figure out life in the rear palace. You must know we get lonely when our more experienced colleagues spend all their time visiting. My youngest sister, in particular." Haku-u jabbed the youngest sister with her elbow; but Seki-u, the girl with the red hairband, looked away as if to deny it.

They weren't wrong, Maomao reflected. She *had* been spending a lot of her time with Xiaolan and Shisui recently, and she realized now that hadn't been entirely appropriate.

Ironically, though, she'd promised Xiaolan and Shisui that she would go see them later today. Doing the consorts' hair removal had become Maomao's job. If she dropped out now, the other two would have to scramble to cover for her. She was just fretting about what to do when she had a thought. All she really needed was someone to keep an eye on her, to make sure she didn't do anything suspicious, right?

"Then why waste any time?" she said. "Let's go to the baths today."

"Huh?" Seki-u said, caught off guard by the invitation. The three sisters might look much alike, but their ages still made them distinct. Seki-u came across as rather innocent. So long as she wasn't too brusque, though, Xiaolan and Shisui should be able to handle her easily enough. And Maomao would let them.

At the word *baths*, Haku-u and Koku-u looked at each other. Was it just Maomao's imagination, or did they share a grin for a fleeting second?

"That might just be a good idea. Seki-u, it would do you good to spend time with other girls who aren't your sisters."

"But sister!"

"Yeah, you know, you might be right. Besides, Lady Gyokuyou ordered us to go to the baths sometimes."

"That's true."

Scandal-hunting was a job itself, in some sense. Maomao beckoned Seki-

u over to her.

"Koku-u, why don't you come?" Seki-u ventured.

"Sorry, I have to work. Have a nice time." The otherwise quiet second sister agreed with the eldest, leaving their younger sibling without much choice.

Maomao, meanwhile, thought she'd started to grasp the sisters' particular pecking order.

"I'm Seki-u. Pleased to meet you," Seki-u said nervously.

Xiaolan and Shisui, for their part, were bubbling with interest in Maomao's new companion.

"Ooh," Xiaolan said, "have you got a new frieeend, Maomao?"

"Well, I'll be," Shisui added.

The two of them managed to surround Seki-u all by themselves. Maomao ignored them and their quaking new acquaintance, instead making sure she had everything she would need. She had a beauty salve, in case the hair-removal process irritated someone's skin, and a silk thread. She'd wanted to bring the leftover "textbooks" from the pleasure district in hopes of selling some, but had given up the idea: it would be too hard with Seki-u along.

Speaking of Seki-u, she was looking at Maomao pleadingly, evidently viewing her as her safe harbor now that her sisters weren't around.

I suppose I should rescue her, Maomao thought. She pointed in the direction of the bath as if to say *Let's go*, and Xiaolan and Shisui raised their hands and went jogging off.

"Who *are* those people?" Seki-u asked.

"They're harmless." *I think*, Maomao added mentally. Then she trotted toward the baths herself.

"Wait for me!" Seki-u cried, and rushed after her.

The work wouldn't be that hard today, as a number of additional massage-givers had shown up recently. When they peeked into the baths, they could see another palace woman giving a massage. Maybe the other women had started to take an interest when they realized that Maomao and the others were receiving little indulgences from the consorts. The previous masseuse had evidently done a better job of keeping the fact hidden.

Maomao stripped down to her apron in the changing room, then

proceeded into the bathing area with her bucket full of tools. Seki-u, though, just stood there fidgeting uncomfortably.

"What's the matter?" Xiaolan asked earnestly.

"Is this all we're wearing?" Seki-u asked.

"Yeah. It gets hot in the bath if you have too many clothes on."

Seki-u, it would appear, was embarrassed. Shisui came up behind her with a wicked smirk, then grabbed her sash, tugging it loose. She pulled off Seki-u's robe and held it up high.

"Huh!" Maomao and Xiaolan exclaimed in unison. They both seemed to be thinking the same thing: that Seki-u had nothing to be embarrassed about. (Xiaolan, like Maomao, was only modestly endowed.)

"Aw, it's fine," said Shisui, who herself was considerably more than *fine*.

"*Fine*, indeed!" Seki-u exclaimed. "I wish I was flat as a board!" She looked at Maomao and Xiaolan. Xiaolan was beginning to look angry, and the eyes of several of the women nearby glinted as well. She was going to make enemies at this rate, Maomao thought.

Shisui seemed to have the same intuition, for she passed Seki-u an apron in lieu of her robe. "Sure. Sure, I hear you. Come on, let's get to the baths," she said, giving Seki-u a couple of encouraging pats on the shoulder.

I knew she'd be easy to tease, Maomao thought, *but I never imagined it would be* this *easy.* She followed Seki-u and Shisui toward the bathing area.

Seki-u's reticence in exposing her body suggested she came from somewhere without a custom of bathing regularly. She was from the same village as Consort Gyokuyou, which would mean she was from the dry lands to the west. Water was a precious resource there; no wonder Seki-u wasn't accustomed to bathing. They had saunas, but probably not any large bathhouses like this one.

"How have you been managing all this time?" Out in the desert it might be one thing, but around here, your body odor would turn noticeable very quickly if you didn't bathe routinely. Especially now, in the hot season. Just wiping yourself down almost certainly wouldn't be enough.

"My older sisters come here, but I asked Lady Gyokuyou for special permission, and..."

Apparently she'd been allowed to use the bath in the Jade Pavilion. Such amenities were ordinarily reserved for the lady of the house. His Majesty sometimes used them as well, but, er, not for bathing as such. (Hence, we'll

omit the details.)

Maomao realized that she had in fact seen Seki-u heading for the Jade Pavilion's bath on several occasions. Even if she was only using the place after her mistress was done with it, she'd been intimidated enough to try not to draw attention to herself. It explained, though, why the other sisters, seemingly so loyal to each other, had been so ready to sell Seki-u out to Maomao. Since the youngest girl had Consort Gyokuyou's permission to use the private bath, they felt they couldn't drag her to the public one. But when Maomao had invited Seki-u along, they saw their chance.

"Sounds like you're embarrassed," Maomao said. "But there's not going to be any time for that once we get started here." Then she dipped a hand towel in a bucket and started cleaning herself off.

If Seki-u was reluctant to even let her chest be seen, what must she make of the consorts lying on the stone table without a thread on them? Gyokuyou insisted on doing virtually everything for herself, so Seki-u had probably never seen the like of it before. She looked like the whole thing was making her head spin—but Maomao didn't have time to worry about her.

"Here, take this." Maomao passed her the perfume oil. "You can at least rub it on them, right?"

"R-Rub it on them?!"

"Uh-huh. Pretend you're marinating some chicken." Maomao added in a whisper that this would cause the women to relax—which would make them more talkative.

Seki-u frowned intensely, but slowly, fearfully, began to daub the prone consort with oil. Xiaolan, who was getting quite good at this, took some of the excess and began to work it into the woman's skin.

Maomao was still in charge of hair removal, which, unlike massage, wasn't something one necessarily needed every day. Hence, she was finished before Xiaolan and Shisui, leaving her with little to do. She was sitting on the stone platform, waiting for their next customer, when she spotted a hesitant figure.

Well, look who it is... Consort Lishu was back. She had her chief lady-in-waiting with her again and was looking around uneasily. *Wonder what's going on.* Each of the upper consorts had her own bath at her pavilion. Lishu didn't need to come all the way to the public bathhouse.

She was so busy looking around nervously that she didn't notice the bucket near her feet and nearly tripped over it. It was very characteristic of her, somehow. Lishu was one of the four upper consorts of the rear palace, but she was something of a sheltered princess, still just fifteen years of age and having never received a visit from the Emperor.

Her chief lady-in-waiting was trying to hold her up, but the floor was just too slippery, and Lishu came tumbling down. Maomao wondered if she didn't have any other ladies she could rely on—but then she thought of the women at the Diamond Pavilion and realized there was simply no one trustworthy among them.

Finally, Maomao felt compelled to head over to Lishu. Some perfume oil or something had spilled on the stones; Maomao poured bath water over them so there wouldn't be any more tripping.

"Oh, thank y—rgh?!" The chief lady-in-waiting's words of gratitude turned to a strangled shout as she saw Maomao. For some reason, Lishu shared her expression of horror. Maomao gave them both a bit of a scowl, but they were shaking like newborn foals. She wished they wouldn't look at a person as if she were some kind of monster. She could take a hint, though, and she was about to go back to the massage table when she noticed something. There were places all over the quavering Lishu's body where the hair hadn't been removed properly; it looked as if someone had tried to shave her with a razor, but they'd left plenty of scratches and even some cuts here and there.

"Would you prefer to try a different way of removing hair?" Maomao said.

"Wha?" Lishu appeared taken aback by the offer, but she didn't resist when Maomao pulled gently on her hand. That was close enough to assent. Maomao thought she still detected some faint trembling but was determined to ignore it. The shoddy shaving bothered her. (Maomao was sometimes bothered by rather unusual things.)

She urged Lishu onto the stone platform—the consort seemed to have the same reluctance as Seki-u to expose her chest—and then began to apply lotion, though she frowned a little as she did it. Xiaolan noticed the cowering consort and the lady-in-waiting who stuck close to her and promptly understood what was going on; she helped pin the consort on the table.

"Don't worry," Maomao said. "I'll be gentle." She was bent on doing the

best job she could.

Seki-u, meanwhile, could only watch, her eyes full of sympathy for the consort.

After the hair removal, Lishu's skin was silky smooth. Almost without realizing it, Maomao hadn't stopped with her arms and legs, but had gone over every inch of her body. Xiaolan was diligently doing the aftercare, daubing the consort with perfume oil. Shisui had needed to help another "customer," who then gave her some juice that she was now enjoying. Xiaolan was looking at her enviously. Hmm: should they try to ask Consort Lishu for an honorarium? Maomao wondered. Looking at the consort, though, who was plastered to the table looking like her soul had left her body, she thought better of it.

"Is this sort of thing new to her?" Maomao asked the chief lady-in-waiting.

"Y-Yes. At the, uh, pavilion, most of the women don't pay much mind to these things. And before that, she spent quite a while in a convent."

"Ah, yes, that's right."

In fact, Lishu's story was rather a sad one, when you thought about it. Married off to a pedophile emperor as a political pawn at an early age, sent to a convent after his death, then forced back to the rear palace by her family. And once there, surrounded by good-for-nothing ladies-in-waiting.

The chief lady-in-waiting had been among the consort's tormentors once, but now she was her mistress's staunch ally, a fact that impressed Maomao. Since she was here anyway, Maomao thought she might as well make the chief lady's skin nice and smooth too, but while the woman submitted to having her arms and legs done, she fiercely resisted when it came to her most sensitive parts. Maomao didn't see the problem: they were all women here, after all.

Once they had finished with Consort Lishu and her chief lady-in-waiting, their work was mostly done for the day. They put on loose robes and tried to cool off from the heat of the baths. Lishu suggested some juice, and while it was altogether possible that she was simply being polite—that she really hoped they would turn her down—the other girls eagerly accepted. Xiaolan was openly joyful, while Seki-u didn't really understand what was happening

but went along anyway.

Other ladies were attending the other consorts, while Shisui had slipped outside where one of the consorts was treating her to a puff on a pipe. She did know how to play the game.

“If I may ask,” Maomao said to Lishu’s chief lady-in-waiting once they were settled in the consorts’ cooling-off area, “what brings you here? I thought the Diamond Pavilion had its own bath.”

“Yes, well...” the lady-in-waiting said uneasily. She looked at Lishu, whose face glowed with the warmth of the baths but had begun to regain its composure. In fact, if anything, she looked a little pale. “That’s where *it* appeared. In the bath...” Now the lady-in-waiting looked as pale as her mistress. “A ghost...”

Chapter 3: The Dancing Ghost

Seki-u had looked very upset indeed when she'd realized the retiring young lady was one of the upper consorts. But once Maomao had heard the story, it would have been impossible to keep her from involving herself in it.

And so it was that the next night Hongniang told Maomao, "Sir Jinshi is asking for you." The food tasting was over; Maomao, who had been sipping her dinner of congee, quickly cleaned up her bowl. Seki-u, who had been eating with her, frowned, but didn't go so far as to say anything.

At the baths the day before, Maomao had recommended that Consort Lishu consult with Jinshi about the ghost. Maomao couldn't advise her on the matter directly, not least because the look on Seki-u's face said she would never allow it. But Maomao knew that if Lishu asked Jinshi about it, there was as good a chance as any that the matter would be referred to her. And now it seemed she'd been right...

I didn't think this all the way through.

Maomao felt a chill run through her as she was ushered into the sitting room. Gyokuyou was there along with Hongniang, as were Jinshi and Gaoshun. Jinshi wore his usual heavenly smile, but she thought she could see his mouth twitching. All she could think was, *Crap.*

On a hunting expedition with Jinshi not long before, Maomao had learned a terrible secret. Every man in the rear palace other than the Emperor was supposed to be a eunuch—but she'd discovered that one of them wasn't. Namely, Jinshi himself. Let's say simply that he possessed quite a fine specimen. Maomao wasn't interested in remembering anything more than that.

Maomao had finally gotten her ox bezoars, and would have been happy to pretend nothing else at all had happened, but Jinshi seemed to have other ideas. This was the first time they had properly seen each other since the trip, and while his lips were smiling, his eyes were not.

"He he he. And what kind of request brings you here today?" Consort Gyokuyou asked, grinning. Her natural curiosity made her want to stick her

nose into all the various matters Jinshi brought to Maomao. This particular case had to do with Consort Lishu, though. How would Jinshi broach the subject?

"It seems a ghost has appeared in the chambers of one of the other consorts."

"My goodness," exclaimed the red-haired lady, but her eyes were sparkling. Beside her, Hongniang was pressing a hand to her forehead as if to say *Again?*

Maomao couldn't help noticing that Jinshi had come straight to the point. She appreciated that he didn't beat around the bush, but Gyokuyou was sharp enough that she would almost certainly figure out whom he was referring to.

"How terrible. Which consort is it? I must pay her a visit to make sure she's all right."

"Lady Gyokuyou, you can't go outside in your state."

"Oh no? Then perhaps I can send someone on my behalf. You and Maomao could go together. Or if you're busy, perhaps I could send Yinghua with her."

"Making sure she was all right" was presumably the last thing on Gyokuyou's mind; she just wanted the juicy details. There was no point hiding Lishu's identity now; the truth would come out as soon as Seki-u opened her mouth. Jinshi had to know that, but perhaps out of some desire to get back at Gyokuyou, he replied, "Consort Gyokuyou, this is a matter of utmost secrecy, so I must ask you not to pay her a visit or send anyone. Such being the case, might you return her to me again?"

"I might be able to *lend* her to you."

The object of all this returning and lending was, of course, Maomao. She, Gaoshun, and Hongniang all sighed at once: were they going to see a repeat of last time?

"No, I want you to *return* her to me—this girl right here! Maomao!" Jinshi stood in front of Maomao and pressed a finger down on her head. Then he let it slide down her hair. "And when she gets back, I believe you'll find you get *no* information out of her." His hand brushed her cheek, his pinky and ring fingers floating across her lips. "Because I've taken pains to keep her quiet."

Then he left the room, walking with an impossibly elegant gait. Gaoshun, openly shocked, followed him. The other inhabitants of the room looked at

Maomao with their mouths agape, but she wore much the same expression they did.

It was Gyokuyou who made the first move. “What *happened* between you two?” Her gaze, still shell-shocked, settled on Maomao, who found the look downright painful.

Gyokuyou proceeded to interrogate her for the next thirty minutes, but Maomao would say only: “It was the frog’s fault.” She was starting to think that a few ox bezoars had been too cheap a price for a secret she would have to carry to her grave.

Maomao wondered what kind of apparition this “ghost” was. Quite frankly, she didn’t believe in such things. There had been the incident at the scary-story gathering a while back, but Maomao had no idea if there had been anything supernatural about that. Yinghua, though, was convinced it had been a ghost, and Maomao didn’t argue.

Call them spirits or whatever; it didn’t matter. Maomao didn’t believe people could be killed by malign supernatural forces. When someone died, there was always a reason: poison, or injury, or sickness. To the extent that a “curse” or the like ever killed anyone, in Maomao’s mind, it was only because the person drove themselves to illness through their own belief that they were a victim of such forces.

In any event, Maomao found herself accompanying Jinshi to the Diamond Pavilion. Personally, she thought this wasn’t necessarily something that warranted his personal attention, that perhaps Gaoshun or the like could have handled it perfectly well, but maybe she was wrong about that.

When they arrived at the Diamond Pavilion in its bamboo grove, it was the chief lady-in-waiting alone who met them. When they realized Jinshi was present, however, the other ladies promptly brushed the dust off their clothes, ran their fingers through their hair, and stood in a line at the pavilion entrance.

Jinshi regarded them with a smile. Maomao could feel a nasty scowl coming on, but Gaoshun looked at her with the gaze of a bodhisattva. He was well aware that Jinshi hadn’t been quite himself since their return from the hunt. He’d pelted her with questions about it, but she wasn’t sure how much she should say and had given only ambiguous answers. Did Gaoshun know Jinshi wasn’t a eunuch? Could he himself be another exception to the rule?

Convinced that thinking about all that wouldn't get her anywhere, Maomao simply followed them into the Diamond Pavilion.

Consort Lishu was entertainingly easy to read: her face was pale when they arrived, but when she saw Jinshi, she promptly flushed red; and then as they came to the matter at hand, the blood drained from her cheeks again. She might not be Maomao's mistress, but it was still somewhat alarming to realize someone like her was one of the four most important consorts.

I suppose that could be one reason His Majesty hasn't taken her for a bedmate, Maomao thought. She was seized by the image of the Emperor as a thoughtful and perceptive man—but then she concluded that it was probably mostly that the bust size involved failed to arouse his appetites. Lishu fell even farther short of His Majesty's preferred ninety centimeters than Maomao did.

"This way, please." The chief lady-in-waiting spoke on behalf of her pallid mistress. A veritable crowd of other ladies-in-waiting followed them around, but *their* main objective seemed to be Jinshi; to be blunt, they were in the way. To put it poetically, one might have said that it was like a beautiful flower surrounded by a crowd of butterflies. But the ladies-in-waiting were far noisier than butterflies, and the overall effect was more like a cloud of flies buzzing around a fish head.

If they knew he wasn't a eunuch...

Ugh. Maomao didn't even want to think about it.

As she was thinking he ought to just hurry up and chop it off (not a very ladylike idea, true), they arrived in the bathing area. Jinshi and the other eunuchs paused briefly, but it was always eunuchs who brought the hot water for the bath anyway, so surely there was no problem.

"Here." The chief lady-in-waiting stopped before the changing room; Consort Lishu stood some distance away, afraid to get too close. "The consort says she was standing here when she witnessed a mysterious figure." She gestured in the direction of the changing room window. There was nothing beyond, just a blank wall: a storage room could be seen beyond the window. Normally the window would have been covered with a bamboo screen, but it had happened to be open and the consort had happened to glance through it.

"Can you describe the figure to me?" Maomao looked at Lishu, who was

clutching her skirt and looking at the ground. It made her seem so young. She lacked any of the authority one associated with a consort.

"Are you still talking about that?" one of the ladies-in-waiting, evidently inspired by her mistress's cowering demeanor, asked in a nasal voice. "You're just so desperate to get attention, Lady Lishu. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. You must have been seeing things."

The woman stepped forward importantly, adding a flirtatious glance at Jinshi for good measure. She was pretty—women of the rear palace were, almost by definition—but there was a dangerous glint in her eyes, one her use of eyeliner emphasized.

"I should think it the duty of a chief lady-in-waiting to admonish her mistress for such behavior," the woman said, shaking her head and sighing. The other ladies-in-waiting clustered around her as if literally falling into line behind her. The chief lady-in-waiting seemed to shrink into herself.

Ah-ha, Maomao thought. The haughty woman must have been the *former* chief lady-in-waiting. It must have rankled her to be demoted in favor of the food taster. She probably needled her like this every day.

Jinshi, who could no doubt deduce that much just as well as Maomao, smiled and took a step toward the self-important lady. "You speak truly," he said. "But *my* duty is to listen when a consort has something to say. I implore you not to take the chance to do that duty away from me."

His voice was sweet as nectar, and the ladies-in-waiting could only nod in agreement with whatever he said. Most of the ladies of the rear palace were, let us say, inexperienced with men, making their reactions to them amusingly easy to read. Then Jinshi added softly that he wished to drink some tea—an effective strategy for clearing the room. The ladies-in-waiting all but stumbled over themselves to be the one to prepare his drink. Actually, another lady-in-waiting entirely had already prepared tea long before, but they didn't know that. He really did know how to do his job.

"Now, milady, might you be so good as to tell me what's on your mind?"

Thus mollified by Jinshi, Consort Lishu lay down on her couch and finally began to speak.

○●○

I went to take my bath just like normal. Personally, I prefer tepid water,

but my ladies always make the water quite hot, so I bathe somewhat late, to give the water time to cool down.

I've begun to get the impression lately that my ladies-in-waiting are not especially fond of me. But at least they don't complain about my bathing alone, which has been my practice ever since my time in the convent. The only time I'm accompanied is when changing my clothes, for which I have the help of Kanan—ahem, my chief lady-in-waiting.

It happened when I had finished my bath and had gone into the changing room. I felt a little overheated while I was drying myself off, so I raised the blind. The window was closed, so not much air came through. But then I saw a flicker. At first I thought it might be the curtain flapping in the breeze, but no. I'd closed the window before getting in the bath, and there shouldn't have been any breeze. Yet it was flapping.

So I looked over, and then I saw it: a big, round face floating there, flickering and dancing, using the curtain like a robe.

The face was smiling. And the entire time, it looked straight at me.

○●○

The very memory was clearly fear-inducing, for Lishu hugged herself and trembled as she lay on the couch. Kanan rubbed her shoulders gently.

Wow, and she used to be so mean to her. So people really could change, Maomao reflected as she sipped her tea. The tea Jinshi requested earlier hadn't yet arrived; there seemed to be an argument going on about who would have the privilege of bringing it to him.

There were almond cookies to go with the tea, a rather cosmopolitan snack. They were crispy and seemed like they would keep well, so Maomao kept glancing at Kanan, wondering if she might be able to wheedle a few out of her as a souvenir.

"You don't think there could have been someone in the area?" Jinshi was asking. "Might you have seen a palace woman and mistaken her for a spirit?"

Lishu and Kanan both shook their heads. "Kanan was with me," Lishu said. "She came running when she heard me shout. And she saw the ghost too." Apparently, despite her fear, Kanan had approached the round-faced apparition in hopes of determining its true identity. "But then the ghost disappeared. There was no one around, of course, and the curtain was as still

as if it had never moved. The window was shut too. That room doesn't get much air through it."

Maomao *hmm*ed and put her hands together, looking at the location Lishu had described. The whole layout seemed off to her. Who would build a storeroom right next to a bath? At the Jade and Crystal pavilions, the bath was a separate structure, with an adjoining room where the consort could relax after her soak. The bath might not be separate in the Diamond Pavilion, but surely somewhere to relax would be a more appropriate thing to put beside it than a storage space.

She was about to steal a glance at Jinshi, but thought better of it and looked at Gaoshun instead. *He* was looking at Jinshi, an expression of concern on his face. Jinshi waved at them, and Maomao took it as permission to ask whatever was on her mind.

"Has this always been a storage room over here?" she said. She couldn't shake the sense that there was probably a more pointed question to ask, but decided to start with the first thing that came into her head.

"No, it didn't used to be," Kanan said.

"Then why is it now?"

"Er, well..." Kanan stood, looking a little uncomfortable, and moved to the storage room across from the bath. She pointed inside, among the rows of shelves and piles of miscellaneous objects.

"Ah, I see," said Maomao. She spotted black marks on the wall—mold, she discovered on closer inspection. Once it had taken root like this, it would require more than a little scrubbing to get rid of it. The proximity of the bath must have made humidity an issue here. And yet the Jade and Crystal pavilions didn't have problems with mold. The ladies-in-waiting of the Jade Pavilion would probably have investigated to figure out where it was coming from so that they could take care of the problem at its source—but such dedication couldn't be expected from the women of the Diamond Pavilion. In fact, the ladies of the Jade Pavilion, with their diligent cleaning, were somewhat exceptional. Here, they'd decided to sweep the problem under the rug, as it were, by simply turning the room into a storage area.

Still, the problem went beyond a little mold: in places, the wall was soft and springy to the touch. It might even be rotted clear down to the foundations.

"I wouldn't have said this building was that old."

“It’s not. It was built when Lady Lishu first entered the rear palace.”

Maomao frowned: could the structure have gotten so unstable in such a short time? Then, she noticed that there was a window directly next to the rotted part. This was the curtain Lishu had said was flapping.

Stroking her chin, Maomao went over to the bathing area; she went through the changing room and peered into the cyprus-wood bathtub.

“There it is.” The words had escaped her lips almost before she knew it. She’d found a small, round hole at the bottom of the tub. To the side of the tub sat a plug. The rear palace had been built over an old sewer system—one of its great conveniences—and the drain no doubt led to it.

In her mind’s eye, Maomao sketched the location of the bath vis-à-vis the storage room, then added in the flow of the sewers. Then she said, “Lady Lishu,” and looked at the consort. “On that day, did you, perchance, accidentally pull out the stopper in the tub?”

Lishu blinked. “How did you know?”

Now Maomao was sure. She walked briskly back over to the mold-infested wall, then tried to move a shelf so she could get a better look at the rotten floor. She wasn’t strong enough to do it alone, but the ever-perceptive Gaoshun quickly came over and helped.

Moving the shelf revealed a spot on the floor so soft that it looked like it might give way if she jumped on it. A crack had formed there between the floor and the wall.

“Would it be possible to check on a blueprint whether the sewer runs directly under this spot?” Maomao asked. It was, once again, Gaoshun who responded promptly to her request. He instructed another eunuch to bring a blueprint of the Diamond Pavilion.

Just as Maomao had suspected, the sewer system ran directly under the floor of the storage room. “With hot water passing just under the floor and steam coming up from it, it would naturally make this wall prone to rot,” she said. “And if some of the steam were to slip out of this crack, it could produce a breeze even with the window closed.”

That explained the flapping of the curtain.

Consort Lishu looked at Maomao open-mouthed, but then her eyes widened and she said, “B-But then, how do you explain that round face?”

Maomao *hmm*ed thoughtfully and stroked her chin again. She looked at the location of the curtain, and the spot where she assumed Lishu had seen

the face. Then she turned slowly around in that spot. With the wall at her back, she spotted a shelf at a diagonal from where she stood. It held something covered with a cloth. She approached and removed the covering to reveal a brass mirror. It looked awfully well polished for something left in a storage room; it still had some shine even now.

"That's—"

"Yes, ma'am?"

Lishu looked at the ground. "That's very important to me. Please be careful with it."

Well, it wasn't as if Maomao had intended to break it. However, she refrained from touching it, instead staring at the mirror's surface. It was almost exactly the size of a human face. "How long has this been here?" she asked.

"Since the new mirror arrived with the special envoys. I used it all the time before that. It was put here when we got the new one."

The envoys had brought the consorts full-length glass mirrors, meaning they showed much more than this brass plate, and far more clearly. There would be no comparison—and no reason not to put this one away in storage.

"And yet it appears to have been polished every day," Maomao remarked. Brass clouded quickly. For the mirror to remain so reflective, it must have been cared for frequently.

Lishu regarded the mirror with a certain lonesomeness. She seemed far more attached to it than to the new gift.

"Since we have it out, take a look in it," Maomao suggested. She took the mirror, careful to hold it with the cloth, and gave it to Lishu. "It will be easiest to see if you make sure there's plenty of light." So saying, Maomao opened the curtain, letting in the sun from outside. The highly polished mirror caught the light and reflected it. "It might be clearest if you hold it like this." Maomao adjusted the position of the mirror in the consort's hands. The light struck the brass surface, then reflected onto the white wall.

Everyone present reacted with astonishment: the light formed a perfect circle on the wall, in which floated the face of a smiling woman.

Jinshi was the first to speak: "What is this?" He stared fixedly at the wall as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Now I get it, Maomao thought. "I'd heard of so-called magic mirrors, but this is my first time seeing one," she said. These were bronze mirrors that

indeed seemed magical: when light struck them, they reflected an image or a message. They were sometimes also called “transparent mirrors” because of the way light seemed to make them see-through when it hit them. They had a long history, although very specialized techniques were required to make them.

Maomao’s adoptive father Luomen had a wide-ranging knowledge that extended well beyond drugs and medicine. Ever since she was small, he’d regaled Maomao with intriguing stories and surprising facts—and this had been one of them.

Presumably, the cloth had simply happened to come off the mirror that night. The polished surface of the mirror had caught the moonlight and projected its image on the wall. The result had been the floating face. A “ghost” created by sheer coincidence.

“This face...” Lishu sniffled, ignoring the tears that ran down her cheeks as she peered at the mirror. “It looks like my poor, deceased mother somehow.” She clutched the bronze plate tightly, her lips twisting with distress and snot pouring from her nose. Quite frankly, it robbed her of any semblance of the authority a consort should have, but it also looked very much characteristic of her. This girl was one of the Emperor’s “four ladies,” yet really, at her age, she should still have been growing up.

Now Maomao knew why she cherished that mirror so much. It was a reminder of her mother. Perhaps she’d hoped to make her daughter feel that even in the rear palace, far away, she was always at her side. Maomao herself didn’t really know what a *mother* was. But it was clearly something so important that it inspired deeply felt emotions in this consort.

Still indecorously dripping snot, Lishu clung to the mirror. The image on the wall had vanished, but no doubt she could still see that gentle smile in her mind’s eye.

“I wonder if Mother is angry that I changed mirrors. Maybe that’s why she appeared.”

“It was simply coincidence, milady,” Maomao said dispassionately.

“I’m told that she loved dancing. Giving birth to me shattered her body so she couldn’t dance anymore. She died never being able to do it again. I wonder if she came back as a ghost now to dance.”

“There is no such thing as ghosts.”

Lishu seemed not to hear Maomao’s cold pronouncement. Kanan took out

a handkerchief and began wiping her mistress's face.

The scene was robbed of its pathos when someone announced, "Your tea is ready, sir."

It appeared to be the former chief lady-in-waiting who had won the struggle to deliver the drink. She'd arrived bearing fragrant tea along with snacks. She had an obsequious smile on her face for Jinshi's benefit, but when she saw her sobbing, snotty mistress, her expression twisted into one of contempt. She quickly regained her smile, however, and slowly approached the consort.

"Lady Lishu, whatever are you crying for? You should be embarrassed, making such a display in front of these people." She was the picture of a diligent servant remonstrating with her revered lady. But it was far too little, far too late to conceal her true attitude from Maomao. The way she put on her best airs for these important men, but promptly reverted to form outside their company, was no better than a third-rate courtesan. And like so many women of that kind, she knew a raw nerve when she saw one.

"Oh, my, do we still have this mirror?" the lady-in-waiting said, looking at the bronze plate. "And after those envoys were so kind as to give you such a lovely new one. Surely you don't need this anymore. Why not bestow it on someone else?" She plucked the mirror out of Lishu's slackened grip and smiled as she gave it an appraising look. No doubt she wanted it for herself.

"—back."

The sound came from Consort Lishu, but she was curling into herself and her voice was as quiet as a fly, and the lady-in-waiting didn't notice. She was too busy stuffing the mirror into the folds of her robe like a juicy piece of loot. She was just about to return to serving Jinshi his tea when Lishu reached out and caught her sleeve.

"Give it back."

"What's that, milady?"

"Give it *back*!" She tore at the woman's collar, grabbing the mirror. The former chief lady-in-waiting was aghast, and Lishu's other women, who had come bustling in belatedly, wore frowns of their own.

"What a way to behave—and in front of guests! You should be ashamed of yourself."

The weeping, the grabbing: taken in isolation, they would seem to reflect poorly on Consort Lishu. It simply looked as if she had lost her temper.

Whatever the other ladies-in-waiting may have thought having arrived late, however, Maomao, Jinshi, and the others knew that they were witnessing only the denouement of this struggle.

It was Jinshi who moved first. “It appears that mirror is a personal treasure of hers. I question whether it’s wise to take it from her without fully understanding what it is.” His tone was gentle and his words were delicately chosen, but it was unmistakably criticism. He stood before the lady-in-waiting, who was straightening her collar, and reached out one large hand. She blushed furiously, for it looked as if he was going to stroke her hair—but then instead he pulled out the hair stick she was wearing.

It was a beautiful piece, finely sculpted; Jinshi squinted at the crest it bore. “Was this also *bestowed* on you?” he asked. “Even if it was, I’m surprised you never learned that a mere lady-in-waiting who wears the crest of a high consort is reaching above her station.” Once again his tone was gentle, and his smile never slipped. But that made it all the more frightening.

Jinshi had to be well aware that Consort Lishu had been at the mercy of her ladies-in-waiting. He’d refrained from making the matter public because it would have been ruinous to Lishu’s reputation, as well as because, as a eunuch, it was simply not business in which he ought to be involved. With physical proof in his hands, however, he was now free to speak his mind. And he would drive the point home as hard as he could.

“In the future, I hope you’ll refrain from overstepping yourself,” he said. That unutterably lovely smile was on his face. The former chief lady-in-waiting simply crumpled to the floor; the other women, evidently remembering trespasses of their own, had all gone pale.

Wow*, is he scary*, Maomao thought: Jinshi was sipping his tea as if nothing had happened at all.

Chapter 4: The Rumored Eunuchs

In the medical office, Maomao the kitten was wrapped around the quack doctor's leg, pleading for a fish. As usual, the office was open but singularly lacking in patients. Maomao (not the kitten) was there researching herbs that might serve as anesthetics.

The moment she'd returned to the rear palace, she'd asked the doctor about the procedure for making eunuchs. She'd learned a bit from her old man, but not enough. She'd hoped to learn more from the quack doctor, but true to form, he wasn't able to tell her anything her father hadn't.

"At it again, young lady?" he asked. His lips were pursed and he wore a dejected look.

Maomao (the kitten) was easily able to bat the fish out of his hand and steal it away. Perhaps thanks to her improved diet, her fur had grown lustrous; it really would make a wonderful brush, but thus far Gaoshun and the doctor had prevented Maomao from plucking any of the kitten's hair.

"They don't make eunuchs anymore. No need to learn how to do it." His expression turned distant. It must have been terribly painful.

Maomao had a thought. "How do the eunuchs get into the rear palace?" she asked.

The doctor dangled a stalk of foxtail for the kitten to swipe at as he replied, "How? Well, they undergo the surgery to become eunuchs."

"No, that's not what I mean." She wanted to know how they were determined to *be* eunuchs.

"Time was, they'd let you in if you had written proof that you'd undergone the surgery. But now..." The quack flushed and ducked his head, a bit embarrassed. He acted almost as unworldly as Lishu. "These days they, uh, *feel* them. To see if anything's there or not."

"Do they grab at it?"

"What a question, miss," the doctor said, exasperated. Such inspections hadn't been the practice in days past, but there had been too many cases of people attempting to pass themselves off as eunuchs, and so the checks had

been implemented. “People forged the documents, or got proxy papers. Some people will do anything for a few coins.”

The inspections were conducted by three officials, each representing a different department of the government. Before, the doctor told her, they’d conducted visual inspections of the would-be rear-palace entrants, but some of the officials found themselves rather discomfited by the process and so it was done away with.

Huh? Maomao cocked her head in curiosity. “They only conduct this inspection the first time a eunuch enters the rear palace?”

“No, each time you arrive, in principle. Though once they come to recognize you, they usually let you right through.”

Maomao didn’t say anything immediately, but continued to lean her head to one side as she gazed at the anesthetic herbs. *Maybe...* But she shook her head: no. The doctor, meanwhile, turned from the kitten and changed the subject. Sort of. “Speaking of eunuchs, did you know some new ones have joined us?”

“I’ve heard rumors.”

“Yes, younger men for the first time in quite a while. I think they’re proving quite a distraction!” He touched his loach-like mustache and sighed. Usually, becoming a eunuch cost a man any specific signs of masculinity, but in some cases, like the quack’s, a mustache or the like might remain. It was perhaps the doctor’s one source of pride.

Young women, particularly the more innocent among them, were often fastidious about cleanliness. They preferred eunuchs, with their almost gender-neutral appearance, to men with too much body hair or intimidating demeanors.

“The fuss is extra big this time because there’s a lot of pretty ones,” the doctor went on. “Right now they’re still behind the scenes, so it’s all well and good, but if one of them proved capable enough to be elevated to a higher position, it could be a real problem. I hope things calm down before then.”

Funny how the quack sounded like none of this concerned him, when he was the one on tenterhooks every time Jinshi was around. Then, too, if he could already comment on the eunuchs’ appearance, he must have gotten a look at them right after they were checked.

“I heard there was quite a scene when one of the lower consorts got too interested in one of the new eunuchs as he was heating the baths.”

“Hmm. I suppose such behavior can’t be ignored,” Maomao said. The lower consorts rarely had any hope of attracting the Emperor’s attention. The occasional *unsatisfied* woman wasn’t a rarity in the rear palace. No doubt there were a few palace ladies who had taken eunuch lovers.

Tough life, Maomao thought as she began to clean up the herbs.

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“When *are* you going to tell her?”

It was the umpteenth time he had asked. Jinshi glared across at his attendant. “In good time.”

“Oh, yes! ‘In good time.’ Of course.” Gaoshun was standing beside the desk in Jinshi’s office, acting studiously unmoved. Well, his brow was furrowed, but that was typical for him. “I understand how nervous you are, but you’re acting a bit *too* overt about it, and it’s making things worse.”

“...With any *other* palace woman, that would be enough.”

“Xiaomao appeared as if she were looking at a snail that had lost its shell!”

In other words, a slug?

“Pipe down already,” Jinshi grumbled. He looked at the papers, separated them into the feasible and the infeasible, and began applying his chop.

There was no one else in the office. The soldier standing guard outside was probably yawning to himself. The place was set up so that they would know the moment anyone approached. It was only under such circumstances that Gaoshun would speak to him of a matter like this.

“I *know*.” Jinshi slammed his chop down, then passed the bundle of papers to Gaoshun. The other man accepted them without a word, straightened them, and placed them in a basket that an underling would take away.

“You have to make your decision soon, or it will come back to haunt you,” Gaoshun said.

“Are you sure it’s not better this way?”

Jinshi knew perfectly well what Gaoshun was thinking. He was suggesting Jinshi should bring the apothecary girl, Maomao, completely into his fold. Meaning...

“It would bring the strategist out of the woodwork, I can tell you that,”

Jinshi added. He could see it now: the monocled man sticking his nose in. He was crazy about his little girl. And he was an unknown quantity, someone even the Emperor had to keep one eye on.

"Then fight poison with poison, as it were," Gaoshun said calmly.

Lakan, "the strategist," occupied a unique position within the palace. Though he officially held the title of Grand Commandant, he belonged to no particular faction, had formed no new faction himself, and drifted here, there, and wherever he pleased. He was the nail that stuck up, and ordinarily he would long ago have been pounded down—but he hadn't been.

The man who had wrested back his inheritance from his blood father and half-brother something more than ten years before to now lead the La clan was a warrior fully worthy of the name. His astonishing genius had powered a meteoric rise through the ranks. Many had no doubt regarded him as an eyesore, and more than a few—so one heard—had tried to knock him off his perch. But it was Lakan who had survived. He did more than burn those who had tried to stop him; one man had even found his entire family scattered to the winds. The frightening thing was that neither rank nor blood intimidated Lakan.

There was no telling what was going on in that man's head. But he could see things that others couldn't, and use them to write a script that dragged his opponents down to the utmost depths.

There was, therefore, a tacit understanding among the inhabitants of the palace that one did not have anything to do with Lakan unless it was strictly necessary. If you didn't hurt him, he wouldn't hurt you. But having nothing to do with him also meant not making him your ally.

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“All my papers would get covered in grease,” Jinshi said, remembering how Lakan hadn’t hesitated to eat oily snacks in his office.

“We would just have to live with it,” Gaoshun said, adding another crease to his brow. Truth be told, he wasn’t thrilled about the method, but it remained that he wanted to tell Maomao the truth. Ignore lineage and let her know what was really going on. Why she and they were in the position they were in, and why they’d had to hide it. Yes, he wanted her to know the truth. But at the same time, he was mildly terrified of how she might react.

Jinshi let out a long sigh and decided to get started on his next job. This was rear palace work, written requests submitted by the consorts to the master of the place.

“Seems to be quite a few of them today.”

“Yes,” said Gaoshun. “The usual matter, I presume. Perhaps along with items related to events the other day.”

The seals were already broken. He, or perhaps another official, must have checked them over once already.

Jinshi opened the first missive and gave it a quick look, then picked up the second. As he looked at a third, and then a fourth, he gradually settled into his chair, until he found himself gazing up at the ceiling, pressing the spot just under his eyes.

A good half of the material concerned just one of the four ladies, Loulan. The grievances were various: She had too many ladies-in-waiting compared to the other palace women. Her outfits were too gaudy and sullied the palace’s scenery. These were familiar complaints, motivated in large part by jealousy. Nothing new.

Aside from that, there was a report that some of the palace ladies were looking at the new eunuchs with romance aforethought.

“I could have seen that coming,” Jinshi muttered.

“Yes, sir.”

The newly arrived eunuchs had all been assigned to behind-the-scenes work: heating the bathwater, cleaning the laundry, and other jobs that mostly involved simple strength. The number of eunuchs had gone down in proportion to the number of palace women, so physical labor was considered a priority in the eunuchs’ tasks. If any of them showed any special aptitudes, they might later be transferred to some department that could use their skills, but these people had once been slaves of the barbarian tribes; due care was

necessary. As for the women, their ardor would cool in time, but for form's sake, he would have to keep an eye on things for now.

"What a headache."

"Life goes on, sir."

It was with many an exchange like this that Jinshi finished his paperwork.

Thus it was that Jinshi arrived at the rear palace the next day to observe the new eunuchs.

He asked the person who oversaw daily tasks in the rear palace about how the new arrivals were doing—heating the bathwater and doing the laundry both required well water, after all. As they spoke, Jinshi looked around.

He saw five people he took to be the newcomers; as they hadn't yet been assigned to a specific department, they all wore white sashes. They were younger than the other eunuchs, but their faces were drawn, perhaps bespeaking their time in slavery. They seemed withdrawn, maybe likewise a legacy of their stay with the tribes. The way they scuttled fearfully about suggested they'd been under the barbarians' thumb a long time.

Jinshi and the current Emperor concurred in their desire to reduce the staff of the rear palace, but this was another aspect of that issue. These people, having been castrated and enslaved, would take some time to adjust to having their freedom again. In a way, having them serve at the rear palace was the best way to help them adjust.

As he watched them, Jinshi understood the root of the issue. One of the newcomers had a positively lovely face. It looked gender-neutral, as eunuch faces tended to, but hollow cheeks gave it a gallant touch. However, the eunuch seemed to avoid using his left hand in his work.

"What's the matter with him?" Jinshi asked.

"It seems he was beaten severely, badly enough to cause some paralysis on the left side of his body." He was also horribly scarred, they were told, so he tried to show a minimum of skin.

"I see..." Getting water from the bath wouldn't be the best job for him, then. He was weaker than the other eunuchs, and thus slower at his work. Meanwhile, the tendency of his face to attract admirers made him unsuited to assignment in the populous southern quarter. "Quite popular, though, isn't he?"

"Yes. He's very intelligent, and most considerate toward the ladies."

At a distance, they could see some palace women talking. Gaoshun looked hard at Jinshi.

"What?"

"Look who's talking," he said with some annoyance.

Indeed, Jinshi had attracted his usual gallery. They turned their loveliest gazes upon him; he smiled back at them but walked over to the eunuch in the most *I'm-here-on-business*-like manner he could muster.

As he approached the newcomers, the more experienced eunuchs nudged them gently and they took the hint and bowed their heads. Their arms where they protruded from their sleeves looked abused. Jinshi saw welts that he took to be the results of whipping. He could well understand why they might wish to cover themselves.

Even as he took note of all this, Jinshi knew he could betray no obvious reaction. He simply gave the new eunuchs a brief exhortation to work hard and assurances that if they did so, they might rise in the world. He was about to leave when there was a crash.

He turned toward the sound, wondering what it could be. A palace woman was standing there, pale-faced, with a stunned expression. An apoplectic eunuch was shouting at her. Beside them was an overturned cart, its contents —precious ice, cushioned in reeds and cloth—spilled across the ground.

The ice had presumably been intended for one of the consorts. The stores in the ice chambers were getting low by this time, making an already rare resource all the more valuable.

Jinshi thought he recognized the terrified young lady. While he was still trying to figure out where he'd seen her, another woman rushed up. Another familiar lady, petite and distant.

Ah, so the young woman was a friend of Maomao's. That must have been why she looked familiar. He wasn't quite sure what to do, so he decided to start by seeing how things developed.

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Chapter 5: Ice

Xiaolan was supposed to be two years younger than Maomao. She'd been sold into the rear palace by her family, but there was no hint of this dark past in her personality. Maybe it was her poor farmer's background that gave her her insatiable appetite for sweets; show her a snack and she would promptly stuff her mouth with it. She was concerned about losing her livelihood when she left the rear palace, and she'd been learning to write and trying to make connections to prepare for life after her contract was up. It was all very professional of her. She was still young in some ways, however, and it manifested as occasional bouts of anxiety.

One of the consorts at the bath seemed to have taken a liking to her, and had given her a small hair stick. It was a minor thing, but Xiaolan, who had been thrilled to receive even a hairband, was over the moon about it. That joy had possessed her until just a moment earlier, when she'd been running along without quite looking where she was going and had run smack into a cart that happened to be stopped in her way.

And so we find ourselves at the present moment.

"What am I supposed to do now?! There's no time to get a new load!" The eunuch who had been pulling the cart full of ice shouted at her in a nasal voice. The cargo was scattered pathetically on the ground. "It's not like I can just wash it off and pretend nothing happened!"

"I'm very... I'm s— s—"

She was trying to apologize, but the eunuch continued to press her. Xiaolan was white as a sheet and trembling all over.

Perhaps you think it's just ice, but this was the season when the cicadas were still trilling. Ice chambers in cool mountain regions had been filled during the winter, and now in the hot season, chunks were cut from the great hunk. Each of the pieces lying on the ground at that moment was probably worth enough to buy a human life.

"Argh! What the hell am I going to do?!"

The eunuch's anger was understandable. He might not hang for this offense, but a good beating likely awaited him. He grabbed his hood and flung it on the ground. Meanwhile, the ice was melting away all too quickly.

Maomao crouched on the ground and picked up one of the muddy chunks still wrapped in some reeds and cloth. "Which consort was it intended for?" she asked the eunuch, grasping at the slightest sliver of hope. There were only so many ladies who could have requested such a large load of ice. One of the emperor's four favored women, or perhaps a middle consort with a very rich family.

"Consort Loulan!" the eunuch said.

Maomao's shoulders slumped. They might have been able to reason with any of the other high consorts—but it had to be Loulan. She loved ostentation, and had probably had it in mind to enjoy the evening cool while nibbling on an ice treat. The eunuch was right: they couldn't give her something that had been in the mud.

I'm just glad Shisui and Seki-u aren't here, Maomao thought. Neither of them had been at the great bathhouse today; they'd both had other things to do. Shisui alone might have been one thing—she had a surprisingly composed and collected side—but if Seki-u had been with them, she would have started crying or shouting and only would have added to the confusion.

Now what? Maomao wondered. This was far beyond an amount of money they could hope to pay back, and more importantly, they were in danger of angering one of the upper consorts. If only they had something that could substitute for ice.

Maomao looked at the shattered ice. They couldn't hope to simply wash it off and still use it. But...

"What's going to happen to this?" she asked, holding up a piece of the reed-wrapped ice.

"Nothing; it's lost now. Do what you want with it," the eunuch snapped.

"Very well."

The eunuch was obviously thoroughly angered. No doubt he was racking his brain to decide what kind of excuse would save him. In any case, the ice was valuable, and it wouldn't serve any purpose just melting away.

Xiaolan just stood there, her face bloodless, her thoughts probably paralyzed by the terror of what punishment might befall her.

Maomao scratched her head. They had ice, but it was inedible. In that

case...

"Pardon me, but what if we prepared some substitute for this?"

"Hrm? What are you talking about?" The eunuch glared at Maomao as if he didn't believe for a second that she could do that.

"You said we can do what we want with this, right? Perhaps I can prepare something different in exchange, and you could take it to Consort Loulan?" Maomao picked up the ice, figuring she had already been permitted that much. The eunuch was staring daggers at her. He obviously didn't trust her, but he hardly wanted to just let himself be beaten either. He was prepared to cling to even the smallest hope.

"The consort will be expecting her snack in an hour," he said.

"An hour," Maomao echoed. That might be just enough time. If, that was, she could find the ingredients she needed.

At that moment, her eyes met those of a person wearing a gossamer smile. A certain gorgeous someone stood among the palace women and eunuchs watching the commotion from afar. He seemed to be quite at his ease. Beside him stood Gaoshun, with an inscrutable expression.

Yes, Jinshi was smiling, yet to Maomao he looked horrendously mischievous. She bit her lip and glanced at Xiaolan. Standing around here wasn't going to do them any good. She grabbed the other girl's hand and pulled her away, determined to make the best use of what she had.

The moment they left the area, the tension finally snapped and Xiaolan started blubbering. Maomao left her with the quack doctor. Then she approached Jinshi, who was helpfully standing just outside the medical office.

"Need something?" he asked.

"Can I borrow a space in the kitchen? And I'd be very glad if you could lend me some ingredients."

"My, demanding, aren't we?" Jinshi drawled. But she didn't have time for this. She had to hurry, or the ice would all melt. "Going to make it worth my while, then?"

"There's nothing that the likes of me could give to one of your stature, Master Jinshi. Nonetheless, I ask you to lend me what I need." He couldn't actually be inviting her to make demands or offer recompense. There was beyond one's station, and then there was *beyond one's station*. But she could

hardly say so out loud.

"It's not as if it was your fault."

"No, I suppose not."

It would have been easy to simply abandon Xiaolan to her fate. She'd simply been the easiest person to pump for rumors and gossip, after all. Maomao had always brought her snacks and souvenirs to compensate her for her chatter; it wasn't as if she owed the other woman anything. It was Xiaolan's own fault for not looking where she was going.

But... Maomao thought.

"I don't think I'd be able to sleep at night if I didn't help her." It was the most honest thing she could say: she had no other reason for doing this.

For a second, she thought she saw Jinshi grimace—but then he looked at the ground, and a quiet chuckle bubbled up from him. "So it's a matter of sleeping well."

"Yes, sir. Poor sleep would impact my next day's work."

"Well, we wouldn't want that." Jinshi smiled. "I have conditions."

"Name them."

"Listen when a person is talking."

Maomao cocked her head, surprised that his "condition" was such plain common sense. "Just that? Are you sure?"

"Who is it who seems incapable of doing 'just' that?"

Maomao only looked even more perplexed. It seemed to her that Jinshi frowned noticeably.

"Very well," he said, "we can add another condition, then. What would be good?" A shadow seemed to fall over his face as he gazed at the ground, and Maomao began to get a very bad feeling—but at the moment there was no one else she could possibly ask for help. It occurred to her that she might be able to go to Consort Gyokuyou, but in a matter concerning Consort Loulan, it seemed best to her to turn to the nominally neutral Jinshi.

What's he got in mind for me? she wondered. Then she shook her head. Her hair tie fell to the floor—had it gotten that loose? Jinshi stared at it. "You don't wear a hair stick?" he asked.

"I have to work," she explained.

"Work or no work, the other ladies of the Jade Pavilion manage to be at least a little more fashionable than you."

He could say what he liked; Maomao only owned so many accessories. A

few nice, easy-to-use hair ties, along with the hair stick and necklace she'd received during the garden party...

"I know I gave you one. Tell me you didn't sell it."

"I haven't, sir."

Yet.

She'd been thinking about it, but hadn't found a way so far. Should she understand this as a command not to sell it?

"Wear that one, then."

She paused. "Is that it, sir?"

"Is there a problem with that?"

She'd thought for sure Jinshi would set her some impossible task, but if he was content just to have her wear a hair stick, that was fine with her.

"When you come to me wearing it, then I'll tell you..." His voice was quiet, almost as if he was talking to himself. Then he looked Maomao in the face. "I'll have everything made ready for you immediately. Follow me, quickly."

He turned away. Maomao patted Xiaolan, whose tears had finally started to run dry, on the back, and followed him.

The kitchen was bustling with preparations for dinner, but somehow they managed to claim a corner for Maomao. Thankfully, there were stovetops to spare, the better to cook for all the palace ladies at once. Yes, it might have been possible to carry out Maomao's plan in the medical office, but it could have been seen as rude to the consort to approach it the same way Maomao made her own snacks. Of course, she often made medicine for Consort Gyokuyou that way, but that was an exception.

Having prepared a place for her, Jinshi was dragged off back to his own work by a less-than-thrilled Gaoshun. Instead, one of the eunuchs sat in a chair to oversee Maomao and Xiaolan. The eunuch who had been carting the ice around was there too, looking around the kitchen with utmost concern.

"Maomao, are you sure you can make a substitute ice treat like this?" Xiaolan asked anxiously.

"I think so," Maomao replied. She'd seen it done once. As long as her memory was accurate, she thought she could make it work.

On the table she had a large ceramic bowl and a smaller one made of metal. Her ingredients included cow's milk, sugar, and several varieties of

fruit, among other things. She understood why Xiaolan would be uneasy: a few of the items here didn't look like they belonged in a kitchen.

She was glad there'd been cow's milk. Among the consorts there happened to be a woman who favored butter, and she would only eat it made fresh each day. But milk spoiled quickly, and Maomao didn't know what she would have done if it hadn't been available. Now she put it into the metal bowl, added the sugar, and beat it with a whisk. Technically, the whisk was intended for tea, but it was the perfect thing for getting plenty of air into the mixture.

"Here, mix this," Maomao said to Xiaolan.

"S-Sure..."

They didn't have time to dally, so Maomao gave Xiaolan the scut work and moved on to the next thing herself. She put the ice on the table and cracked it with a hammer.

"What are you doing?!" Xiaolan cried as the chunks of ice got smaller and smaller.

"Don't worry about me. You just whisk like your life depends on it." Maomao put the shards of ice into the big bowl and added a little water, then tossed in a liberal handful of salt. Xiaolan shook her head as she watched. "Here, Xiaolan, put that in here." They took the metal bowl and put it in the salted ice water. Then they continued to stir vigorously.

Xiaolan's expression gradually went from one of surprise to one of wide-eyed shock. "Huh? I don't believe it!"

The milk had begun to solidify and stick to the surface of the metal. Maomao scraped it off with the whisk and continued to stir. "Cut up those fruits, nice and small," she instructed.

"Y-Yeah, sure thing..." Xiaolan took a cleaver and chopped up the fruit, depositing it on a dish. Maomao stirred as hard as she could, and the milk slowly settled into a solid but fluffy consistency.

"All done!" Xiaolan said.

"In here." Maomao set the whisk down and began mixing in the fruit with a spoon, after which she poured the concoction into a glass bowl. Feeling it wasn't quite enough, however, she added some sweetened stewed fruits over the top.

At that point she heard a distinct *gulp*. Xiaolan's eyes, which had been running with tears until not long ago, were shining brightly.

“Is that...?”

“As you can see. *Ice* cream.”

If she’d had more time, she could have added eggs, or maybe some herbs to give it a nice fragrance. But she *hadn’t* had time, and that was all there was to it.

“How did you do it?” Xiaolan asked.

“We can talk about it later. Right now we have to get moving, or we won’t be in time.”

“I know, but...” Xiaolan looked at Maomao pleadingly. “We have to make sure it tastes right, don’t we?”

Realizing what Xiaolan was getting at, Maomao scooped up a bit of what was left on the surface of the metal container with her spoon and put it in Xiaolan’s mouth. As the cold ice cream melted in her mouth, Xiaolan’s face took on a joyous aspect, her fingers working open and closed.

Evidently, the treat was a success.

“Here! It’s ready! We did it! You can take this to the Lady Consort!” They packed the ice cream in its bowl in what was left of the ice and handed it to the eunuch. Both the man who had been guarding them and the one who had been transporting the ice looked at them wide-eyed.

“Did you really pull it off?” the eunuch asked skeptically.

In response, Maomao simply put a spoonful of the stuff in his mouth. His expression changed to one of rapture.

“I should think this will be acceptable,” Maomao said. The eunuch, his eyes still wide, reached out for another spoonful, but she batted his hand away. He looked at her somewhat dejectedly. “Come on, now!” she said. “Before it melts!”

“Yes, of course.” The eunuch placed the container carefully in a basket, wrapped it in a cloth, and then went running off. Their guard looked a touch envious, but seeing that his work was done, he stood and left.

Finally, Maomao and Xiaolan looked at each other.

“Thank goodness it all went well,” Xiaolan breathed.

“We don’t know that yet. The real question is whether the consort will like it,” Maomao said. She’d asked Jinshi if Loulan had any particular likes or dislikes, so the chances of the consort simply rejecting the ice cream outright were small. And she thought she’d made plenty of it, including enough to account for the checking for poison that would inevitably be

necessary.

"Aw, don't tease me like that. Anyway, come on, let's eat the rest before it melts!"

"Yeah, better eat up!" a new voice said.

Maomao and Xiaolan looked over, startled, to find Shisui with the ice cream bowl firmly in her hands.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" Xiaolan said.

"Eh, you know. There was some kind of commotion, and before I knew it, I'd dropped what I was doing and come to investigate."

"You're the worst!" Xiaolan exclaimed.

Maomao privately agreed, although she herself was hardly in a position to criticize.

"We had the most *awful* time... Oh! Shisui! Don't eat it all by yourself! You can't just steal someone else's hard work!"

"Thif is delishous!"

"Stop that! Leave some for me!"

Shisui fled, the spoon still in her mouth, with Xiaolan in hot pursuit.

Guess I didn't make enough. Maomao, wondering if the last of the ice would be enough to prepare another snack, started putting ingredients in the bowl again.

Chapter 6: Breech Birth

"Oh, it moved," Consort Gyokuyou said, stroking her swollen belly. It was only just beginning to turn cool, yet a thick robe hung from her shoulders. Hongniang got steaming mad if Gyokuyou let herself get even a little bit chilly, and that was a terrible sight to behold.

"Yah! Yaaah!" Princess Lingli yelled when she saw her mother's belly move. She was on a thick rug on the floor, playing with Maomao the kitten. The other Maomao had patiently trimmed and blunted the kitten's claws, and had also discouraged her from biting; so as long as Lingli didn't do anything completely outrageous to the kitten, she probably wouldn't get herself in trouble. But then again, one never did quite know what a child was going to do. Thus Maomao (the young woman) sat on the rug, watching closely lest the princess do anything naughty. She was always ready to grab the furball by the scruff of the neck if she looked like she might try to bite the girl.

"It's funny. Babies start to develop a personality even before they're born," Gyokuyou said, gazing down at her stomach. "Lingli, she kicked upward all the time, but this child always kicks downward."

"Downward, ma'am? Always?" Maomao asked, cocking an eyebrow. She snatched up the kitten and tossed her in a basket. The princess objected vociferously, but Maomao simply placed the basket on a table where Lingli couldn't reach it. Then she went over to Gyokuyou and stooped in front of her. "May I have a look? You don't mind if I touch your belly?"

Gyokuyou peered at her questioningly. "Not at all, but...is everything all right?" Maomao responded by running her fingers gently along the consort's belly. As if in response, she felt another kick, down and outward.

Maomao frowned. "Tell me about Princess Lingli's birth."

It was Hongniang who answered. "It was remarkably easy, far more so than I would have expected for a first child. I suppose it helped that the princess was somewhat small." Hongniang was now holding the basket with Maomao in it (Lingli having proven too industrious in her attempts to reach the tabletop), and the kitten could be seen peeking out from under the lid as if

she found this all very intriguing.

"Who attended the delivery?" Maomao asked.

"I did," Hongniang said, though she looked somewhat uneasy about it. "You can't count on the doctor here, and I'd done some studying, so we made it work, somehow. It's just..."

"Yes?"

"We had a palace woman with us who had experience doing deliveries, but just when the princess was due, she got quite ill. It was the unluckiest thing."

Hongniang had been forced to step into the role with very little warning and said she had been at her wit's end. It was her natural tenacity that had saved the day. "The midwife was an older woman who'd been temporarily retained at the rear palace to assist with the births. But anyone who would get a stomach ache at such a crucial moment—well, she was urged to quit in short order. My understanding is that Consort Lihua was assisted by a different midwife."

Maomao nodded with interest. Would they retain a midwife this time as well, then?

Something still nagged at her, though. Gyokuyou, seeming to sense her lingering question, smiled at Maomao. "Something on your mind? Please, speak freely."

Maomao took this as license to voice her doubt in concrete terms. "My concern is whether the midwife would be able to cope if this should turn out to be a breech birth."

"A breech birth?" Gyokuyou rubbed her belly again, then frowned at what must have been another kick.

"You say the baby always kicks downward. If that is indeed kicking you feel and not punching, then that would mean the child's head is pointing upward."

At birth, the head needs to emerge first. The head is the largest part of the child, and it passing through the birth canal first makes the passage of the rest of the body easier. Having the feet come first makes the birth dramatically more dangerous.

"Are we certain it's a breech birth?" Gyokuyou asked.

"No, ma'am; it's only a possibility. A more thorough examination might make the situation clearer."

"Can you do that?"

It was hard for Maomao to answer that question in the affirmative. Her old man, for all he knew of medicine, had really only specifically taught her about drugs. Outside of that particular subject, Maomao's knowledge consisted mostly of what she'd been able to glean from quietly watching him work.

Gyokuyou realized from Maomao's silence that a question had been the wrong way to approach the matter. "Do the exam, please," she said instead.

Maomao glanced up at the ceiling for just a second before she approached the consort. "Let me tell you what it will involve, and then you tell me if you still want me to do it," she said, and then described the nature of the exam in detail.

"Goodness, really?" Gyokuyou asked, putting a hand to her mouth. The method would have been a matter of profound embarrassment to a sheltered princess; doing what Maomao described to such a person would have been to invite punishment as the worst of villains. But Gyokuyou said, "Well, it's nothing compared to actually giving birth. Go ahead."

"Yes, ma'am."

Such was a mother's strength. Maomao prepared to begin the examination.

Phew, Maomao thought as she washed her hands after the examination. It involved not only the abdomen, but the genitalia, so even with her warning it wasn't exactly easy. Ideally, the exam would have been done earlier in the pregnancy, but knowing what it entailed, she'd been avoiding it. Besides, Maomao was no professional; if the baby had been too small, she wouldn't have been able to tell anything about it.

Her final judgment: there was an eighty percent chance that they were dealing with a breech birth. She'd judged the child's location by the sound of its heartbeat and the feeling of its kicks.

Babies in breech sometimes changed positions on their own as they grew. The fact that the child was still upside down at this point in Gyokuyou's pregnancy, however, was not a good sign. There was only something like two months until the child would be born.

"What do you think we should do?" asked Consort Gyokuyou, who had finished changing. Hongniang was beside her, looking worried.

“I’m told that exercise and moxibustion can help remedy the condition. Information on the exact exercises you should do might best be obtained outside the rear palace, but as for the moxa, I know how to administer it.”

“I see. I’ll try asking around to see if there might not be any other ways to help while I’m at it,” Gyokuyou said. She requested Maomao, however, to handle the moxibustion; then she stroked her belly and, as if she had just thought of it, said, “What will we do if it doesn’t change positions?”

“In a worst-case scenario, we may have to cut your belly open.”

Maomao didn’t want to think about it. Even with a proper midwife present, the danger would be great. Cutting Gyokuyou open would be a last resort, and if it came to that, the consort’s life would be on the line. The fact that there would be no qualified physician to turn to if something went wrong only added to Maomao’s discomfort.

If only the quack had half an idea what he was doing, she thought, but she knew he had always been a quack and always would be. A sweet-hearted man but absolutely not a competent doctor. Nonetheless, it would be a tall order to bring a different physician into the rear palace. Officially, he would have to be a eunuch, and he wouldn’t be able to enter until after he had been castrated. Could that be done in time—or otherwise, could the system possibly be changed quickly enough to help them?

Wait! Maomao put a hand to her chin. She could think of one person who fit their needs perfectly. *But... Shit.* She groaned and scratched her head, and then, after much internal debate, looked at Gyokuyou, knowing that nothing ventured meant nothing gained.

“I can think of one person who might be able to help us, ma’am. Someone with medical skills beyond reproach, who’s delivered children by surgery several times before.”

“Goodness, you can?”

“Really?” Hongniang said, sounding much less convinced than Gyokuyou. “You’re not thinking of Master Jinshi’s lady-in-waiting, are you?” (What *had* Suiren gotten up to in this pavilion?)

“I’m not thinking of a lady-in-waiting. I’m thinking of a doctor.” There was only one problem; namely... “He’s a criminal who was banished from the rear palace.”

She was thinking of her adoptive father, Luomen.

Consort Gyokuyou didn’t bat an eyelash, but Hongniang was

incandescent. “We could never let such a man near the consort,” she said forcefully. She didn’t yell as she often did when scolding one of the palace women; instead she quietly, coldly eviscerated Maomao’s idea. “This person might hold Consort Gyokuyou’s life in their hands. It must be someone we can trust.”

That much was certainly true. And under other circumstances, Maomao might have seen fit to back down at that point. But not this time. Luomen was, in fact, their best choice to ensure Gyokuyou’s safety—and more than anything else, Maomao had a deep and abiding respect for her old man. He might be softhearted, luckless, and grandmotherly, but she was also convinced he was the best doctor their nation had.

“We *can* trust him,” she said. “He’s as good as any ten doctors you might find.”

“It’s not like you to push a matter like this,” Hongniang observed, though Maomao had only said what was true. Nonetheless, the chief lady-in-waiting wasn’t going to cave either. “But you said he’s a criminal. I don’t know what his crime was, but that’s a fact we can’t ignore.”

Hongniang remained calm, but Maomao’s gaze took on a dangerous edge. As the two women faced each other, their ordinary positions reversed, it was Consort Gyokuyou who interceded. “Perhaps you could tell us what he did? Hongniang, we should listen to what Maomao has to say instead of dismissing her out of hand—and Maomao, you need to stay calm and explain.”

At that, Maomao felt the rush of blood to her head subside. She let out a small sigh and composed herself, then turned to Gyokuyou and Hongniang. “This person was a eunuch and medical officer. He was responsible for delivering the current ruler and the current heir apparent, as well as Lady Ah-Duo’s child. As for why he was banished from the rear palace, I’ve heard only that the reason was somehow connected to Consort Ah-Duo.”

The fact was, Maomao didn’t have a strong understanding of the reason. It would be untrue to say she couldn’t guess what might have happened, but she wasn’t at all sure, and she wasn’t about to offer wild speculation.

“I see... So that’s it,” Gyokuyou said. Oddly, she seemed to have already known about this. She was an upper consort, living in the rear palace because she had the Emperor’s favor. She would surely have heard stories. “And, if I may ask, how is this person related to you, Maomao?” She sounded less

concerned with his status as a criminal than with what kind of person he actually was.

"He's my adoptive father, as well as my teacher in matters of medicine."

Gyokuyou closed her eyes for a second, thinking, then opened them again. "All right. I'll suggest it to Sir Jinshi."

"Lady Gyokuyou!" Hongniang exclaimed, but the consort only smiled.

"Hongniang, I want to surround myself with capable people and make the best use of them that I can. If they're trustworthy as well, all the better. He can't be a bad person if this stray cat of ours has taken such a shine to him."

Stray cat, huh? Nice.

"But he's a criminal."

"Yes, so they say, but you must have heard at least a few tales of how the rear palace was in those days. How many were purged in the time of the great empress regnant? Are you telling me you're going to take such calumny at face value?" Her words were gentle, but insistent.

The empress regnant, Maomao thought. Quite a presence to invoke.

"If you still aren't comfortable, we can have him kept under watch. Would that be a fair compromise?" Gyokuyou said, and then she took paper and brush from the table and started writing a letter to Jinshi.

Two days after bringing up the matter with Hongniang, a grandmotherly individual appeared at the rear palace. Maomao was surprised; they'd moved quicker than she'd expected.

Gaoshun accompanied Maomao's old man as he paid his respects at the Jade Pavilion, after which they headed to the medical office. He was going to be with the quack doctor for a while. Maomao's father had a soft spot for cats, so she expected to see the kitten's fur grow even more lustrous now.

She'd initially worried about what would happen if the quack found himself out of a job after her father showed up, but it seemed there was no need to fret about that, at least for the time being. Her old man's admission to the rear palace had, after all, been an emergency measure, a compromise.

I'm glad about that, at least. Without him, there would be no physician worthy of the name in the pleasure district. Maybe it wasn't her place to be concerned about that, considering she had suggested the idea to begin with, but she worried that if he wasn't back home by the turn of the year, the old madam might come storming into the rear palace to drag him back herself.

Such were the thoughts occupying her mind as she worked at cleaning the Jade Pavilion. Perhaps in part because of her old man's visit, all the chores had been packed into today, and they all had to work diligently. Yinghua came up hauling a fresh bucket of water.

"So that guy—he's your dad, right, Maomao?" she asked.

"Mm... Yeah."

Yinghua looked puzzled. Strictly speaking, Luomen was Maomao's granduncle, but the two of them looked nothing alike—probably the source of Yinghua's confusion. Anyway, Maomao was content to let the subject lie. Trying to explain further would only be a pain in the neck.

"He's just..." Yinghua searched for the words. "...not how I pictured him at all. I guess you could say he's almost...normal. I'm like, is this really the guy who raised Maomao?"

"And what exactly were you imagining?"

"Ahem. Well, you know. He seems downright..."

Guiyuan and Seki-u, who were working alongside them, nodded along with Yinghua. Haku-u, who didn't know Maomao very well yet, was simply listening to the conversation with a grin on her face.

"...sensible?" Yinghua concluded.

"For sure!" Guiyuan and Seki-u agreed in unison.

I'll never understand these people, Maomao thought. For the life of her, she couldn't imagine what they had been expecting.

Chapter 7: Festering Resentment (Part One)

Life, it seemed, was fun and fancy free at the medical office at the moment.

"Now, this little kitten, she's a smart cookie," the quack was saying. "She loves fish, but she won't eat the head, tail, or innards." It had only been a few days, but he seemed to understand perfectly well that he would never be able to teach Luomen anything about medicine; instead he stuck entirely to nonmedical topics on which he perceived he had some measure of authority. And Maomao's old man, ever personable, reacted with appropriate interest to the quack's every observation. Maomao thought the loach mustache even looked a little perkier than usual.

Indeed, her father was being himself: "It's her loss. I rather enjoy this bitter flavor myself." He took a piece of the small fish the quack doctor had chopped up and popped it in his mouth. Granted he had always taught her not to let food go to waste, but even by that standard it was a little embarrassing. This wasn't the pleasure district; in the rear palace, he could be assured of decent meals—but nonetheless Maomao didn't stop him; she knew that this was simply her old man's nature.

Luomen never forgot something once he had seen or heard it; from one simple fact he could deduce ten more. He was a genius, the greatest doctor in the land. The one thing he didn't seem to know anything about was greed, ambition, or anything else besides personal simplicity. For him, the kitten's leftovers were as good as a feast.

Maomao was preparing the mugwort she would use in the moxibustion. She'd already crushed it in a pestle and dried it out. It was an involved process, and it would have been easier to just buy some, but the ingredients happened to grow in the rear palace, and anyway, it provided her with an excuse to come to the medical office.

Maomao's daily tasks hadn't changed just because her father was here.

“We should have Maomao continue to do everything she normally does,” Hongniang had suggested, the stubborn chief lady-in-waiting still unable to reconcile herself to the presence of a criminal. Maomao had assumed this would leave her old man twiddling his thumbs in the medical office, but not so; sometimes, he was called away by a eunuch who came to summon him. Maomao suspected Jinshi was behind it.

Her father never revealed where he was going or where he had been, but Maomao could take a guess. There was at least one more pregnant woman in the rear palace besides Gyokuyou, and as long as he was here, Luomen would be obliged to treat all the consorts equally. And although she was Consort Gyokuyou’s lady, Maomao was relieved to know her father was making the rounds. She wanted Consort Lihua’s child to grow up healthy this time, and that began with a safe delivery.

She’d heard that after the departure of her former chief lady-in-waiting, Shin, some older and more levelheaded ladies had come to serve Lihua. They knew how to comport themselves, and most likely had experience delivering children.

The rear palace was full of relatively young women; women who came and went every two years, at that. It was supposed to be a place to raise royal children, but it wasn’t currently serving that purpose. It was possible to argue that the Emperor should simply produce as many offspring as he could, and let the strongest survive—that such was the fitting fate of a ruler’s progeny. But considering the number of men in the current Emperor’s bloodline, that argument would have to be revised.

To put it quite bluntly, there weren’t enough stud horses.

If they could somehow remedy that problem...

Her father was writing something as he munched on the fish innards. He was no doubt well ahead of Maomao; whatever she might think of, he’d certainly thought of it already himself. At the moment, he was making a list of points of concern in the rear palace. The quack picked up the kitten to stop her from interrupting Luomen’s writing, then peered down at the list himself.

“You do have the loveliest handwriting,” he remarked.

That’s *what gets his attention?* Maomao thought. Well, the quack was who he was. Of course he wasn’t interested in what it said.

“The written style, though, is practically childlike. You don’t think it lacks something in gravitas?” the quack continued with a chuckle, running

his free hand along his mustache.

"You're quite right. There are those here who can still only understand simple sentences," Luomen replied.

Maomao clapped her hands as it hit her, a vague intuition of what he planned to do. Her old man passed her the sheet of paper. "Anything I missed?" he asked.

"Offhand, I think it looks good."

Good, good, she thought she heard him murmur as he turned to the quack. "My dear Guen. Would your family happen to have some paper, say, half this size?" He folded the paper in half and held it up to demonstrate.

Guen? Who's that? Maomao thought, but there were only three of them in the room, so by process of elimination it had to be the quack doctor. *That name hardly sounds like him*, she thought, and resolved to continue thinking of him as "the quack doctor."

"Sure. We can't use scraps like that. We pulp them and reconstitute them into new paper," the quack said.

"Perhaps you might be willing to sell me some at a reduced price, then?"

"I certainly could. It would be my pleasure, in fact."

Luomen turned to Maomao. "I believe an institute of practical studies recently opened here, yes?"

"That's right."

"Is everyone learning their characters well enough?"

Well, that varied from person to person. But if you wrote carefully and clearly, virtually everyone would be able to read what you had written.

"I wonder if they might be able to use this for writing practice at the institute. Maybe you could suggest it? I doubt they'd accept the idea from me, but they might listen to you."

Maomao started back, caught between astonishment and exasperation. How willing was this man to use everyone and everything he could find? He was more cunning than a merchant. With a mental abacus so developed, she thought, it was a wonder how he gave charity until he himself was starving.

"I'll try asking today," she said, as she tucked the mugwort into a paper packet.

"Excellent, thank you." Then her father stood and left the medical office. For the bathroom, she presumed. Call it a bit of meaningless trivia, but when one became a eunuch, one found oneself doing "number one" more often.

That reminded Maomao, though, that she needed something herself. She stood and opened a drawer of the medicine cabinet. “I’m gonna grab a few bottles of alcohol, ’kay?”

“Sure, sure.”

Maomao had made the alcohol in the first place, so she found it hard to have any compunctions about taking some for herself, but when she’d done it the day before, her old man had gotten angry at her. Evidently he felt she should show the quack more respect.

Let’s see... Was there anything else she needed? Come to think of it, she remembered Gyokuyou saying something about having trouble sleeping lately.

“I wouldn’t mind some sleeping medicine too. That all right?”

“Sure, take whatever you like.” The quack was absorbed in playing with the kitten. Maomao rifled through the medicine cabinet, though *this* time she felt a pang of conscience.

Something that won’t harm a pregnancy, she thought. It wasn’t unusual for a woman to find herself sleeping more lightly when she was pregnant. Maomao didn’t need some heavy-handed drug, just a little something to help the consort relax. *Maybe this*, she thought, opening a drawer that contained an herbal remedy.

Suddenly she found Maomao, the cat, curled around her ankles—when had she gotten there? She tried to nudge the kitten out of the way in annoyance, but the cat ran her claws along Maomao’s skirt.

“Stop, you’ll tear it!”

“Hey, now, what are you doing?” the quack said, grabbing the kitten.

Was this what she wanted? Maomao wondered, looking at the herbs in her hand. Maomao (the cat) was mewling in a most unusual way and swatting at Maomao (the woman) with her little paw.

“Well, you can’t have it.” The quack and Maomao’s old man might dote on the kitten, but Maomao herself would not be so easily swayed. She certainly wasn’t going to give precious herbs to the likes of a little furball. She quickly put them in a paper packet to get them out of the cat’s way.

“I’ll be going, then,” she said, and left the medical office.

Jinshi would most likely approve of what her old man was trying to do. *Still, I suppose it would be polite to ask him in person.* It would take days to

go through Jinshi, though, so she was heading to the school first.

That reminds me... The hair stick Jinshi had given her was in the folds of her robe. She'd taken it out while she'd been working because Consort Gyokuyou, Yinghua, Guiyuan, and Ailan wouldn't stop grinning and teasing her about it. *I'll have to remember to put it back in later.* She reached the school in the northern quarter before she'd even finished ruminating about how much trouble the hair stick brought her.

The school was normally home to an elderly eunuch with a moderately insufferable personality, but he wasn't standing at the lectern today. He was the man who oversaw the shrine designed to determine the lineage of would-be emperors. He could be a pain to deal with, but it would be quickest to talk to him. He knew Maomao's father, and if she said Luomen was here, it would probably grease the wheels.

She walked through the hallways, heading for the eunuch's office, which was a short distance from the classroom. The door was slightly ajar. "Are you here, sir?" she called. She peeked into the room to find the old man squinting down at a book. He arched an eyebrow, and when he noticed Maomao standing in the doorway, he gestured to her to come in, still holding the book.

"No Xiaolan today?" he asked. He was in the habit of instructing her in various and sundry subjects. The bubbly, affable serving girl seemed to have charmed more than one palace resident.

"No; I'm here on personal business today," Maomao said. She decided the quickest way to explain would be to show him, so she put the paper Luomen had written on the table. The old eunuch's eyebrow moved again, and this time he gestured toward a chair as if to say *Sit*. Maomao took a seat.

"This is Luomen's handwriting, unless I'm much mistaken."

"Very perceptive, sir."

"We all endeavored to mimic his writing, back in the day. They said if you could write like he did, you'd pass the civil service examinations with flying colors."

That day had to have been *back* quite a while indeed, then. Forty, maybe even fifty years ago. In this country, the civil service examinations were separate from the test to become a doctor, but Maomao's old man had passed them both. He had the gifts to have been an excellent civil administrator, but he'd seen a vagrant child collapsed by the roadside with illness, and pity had moved him to choose the path of medicine. He'd always been that way—and

his personality, she'd heard, had left him quite alienated from her biological father.

"He came all this way just to deliver this to us?" the old eunuch inquired.

"No, sir; he's in the rear palace now."

"Well, now. I hadn't heard." The old man's eyes, hidden among his wrinkles, opened wide; his surprise was clearly genuine. The northern quarter was something of a wilderness in the rear palace, and word of new developments was evidently slow to reach him.

Now that she thought about it, Maomao realized Xiaolan hadn't had much of a reaction when she saw Maomao's old man. Much as the girls loved rumors and gossip, after the arrival of all those handsome young eunuchs, one gnarled old man barely warranted her attention.

"So Xiaolan knew. She could have told me..."

"I suspect all the much younger arrivals chased it right out of her mind."

"Ah, *young* eunuchs." The elderly teacher stroked his chin and gazed out the window. Beyond the carved, circular portal was the shrine for discerning the children of Wang Mu, the Mother Royal. But that wasn't what the eunuch was looking at. He was staring somewhere beyond it. "I know how little excitement there is around here, but still I question all the commotion over the likes of them."

"How's that, sir?"

"Hm? Having all of the young eunuchs in the southern quarter would get in the way of getting work done, so some of them were sent here."

That made sense. Far fewer palace women frequented the northern quarter.

"They've gone to assist at the clinic, where I gather they've been quite helpful."

The clinic was another place without any young women. Instead, it was staffed entirely by levelheaded older ladies. Maomao could easily picture the palace woman she'd met there—Shenlü; wasn't that her name?—making best use of the eunuchs with her force of personality.

"Anyhow, back to the business at hand. What was it you wished to ask of me?"

"I wondered if it might not be possible to use this as a sample for writing practice for the women at the school. We'll provide paper for you to use."

That got another eyebrow arch out of the old man, who proceeded to

carefully peruse the long, thin strip of paper. “He wrote something like this once long ago as well. He was doing it all by himself back then, quite the task, and before I knew what I was doing, I found myself helping him. I see the years have at least taught him how to make use of people. Compared to the help I gave him then, this is child’s play.”

“He wrote some sort of text like this before?”

“Certainly, and posted it all over the rear palace. I never wanted to see the blamed thing again, though, and wouldn’t let him put one anywhere near me.” The old eunuch shook his head as if even today he would be loath to write that text out even one more time.

Maomao looked at the list of cautions on the paper. It included, among other things, a brief remark about the toxic face powder.

And he published something like this before? The thought felt strange to her. Seized by the desire to investigate, she put a paperweight down on the list and stood up, intent on following her feeling wherever it led. “All right, we’ll bring some paper by later,” she said.

“Oh, don’t you want a cup of tea before you go?”

“No, thank you, I’m afraid I’m in a hurry,” she replied and left the eunuch’s room.

And with that, she was off to...

Chapter 8: Festering Resentment (Part Two)

Just like the last time she'd visited, the clinic was bustling with older palace women, but now interspersed among them were the young eunuchs, some of whom were in the nearby laundry area washing sheets by laying them on paving stones, treading on them with their bare feet, and dousing them with well water.

Maomao took it all in out of the corner of her eye as she came up to the clinic entrance. A woman who knew her happened to be there and popped out to see what she wanted.

"Not feeling well?" the woman asked.

"I'm all right, thanks," Maomao replied.

She glanced at the woman, wondering how best to handle this. She wasn't sure it was appropriate to ask here and now, but she couldn't simply ignore the matter either. Above all, she was concerned about who here had come up with the idea in the first place.

She decided to make up a pretext. "I believe you use alcohol as a disinfectant here. I thought perhaps this might serve." She produced a small bottle from a cloth pouch. Some alcohol—she'd made a little extra just for good measure and had brought it along with the moxa. She'd always intended to bring it to the clinic, but somehow she'd kept putting it off.

"What's this?"

Maomao pulled the stopper and tilted the bottle toward the woman, who took a sniff.

"I think it may be more effective than what you're currently using," she said.

After a beat, the other woman said, "I'll go ask," and ushered Maomao into the building. She brought her to another room and offered her a chair—and there was the forceful older lady, Shenlü. Maomao, evidently regarded as a guest, was offered some sour fruit juice.

“We would be most grateful for this,” Shenlü said. “But are you sure it’s all right?” There wasn’t much alcohol in the rear palace to begin with—even less so distilled spirits.

“I have more.” In fact, she had another bottle in the pouch, plus more back at the medical office. And if all that ran out, she could simply make another batch. “I’ll bring you some more later.”

“That would help us very much.” Shenlü bowed her head. She sounded a touch stiff, perhaps all too aware of the fact that Maomao was one of Consort Gyokuyou’s ladies-in-waiting.

“Please, think nothing of it. I made plenty. By the way...” Maomao was trying to sound as nonchalant as possible, but acting had never been her strong suit; she wasn’t quite sure if she sounded natural. All she could do was try to appear calm. “It seems all the women around here are quite accomplished, are they not?”

“What brought that on?” Shenlü asked, somewhat abashed.

So she hadn’t quite pulled off the nonchalance. Forget it. Maomao forged ahead. “Oh, it’s simply that the usual term of employment here is two years. But it seems the women in the clinic have been here rather longer...”

“Yes, old ladies, all of us,” Shenlü said with a little twist of her lips that almost amounted to a smile. Maomao didn’t respond. “I see you’re not going to argue,” Shenlü added.

Women came into the rear palace in their teens, or at the oldest in their twenties, so Shenlü had certainly been here twenty years at the very least. Probably more. And therein lay the mystery. Maomao wasn’t sure whether to ask the question out loud or not, but Shenlü’s eyes grew distant. “We were young once too, you know. I was just ten when I came here.”

Maomao said nothing.

“All the palace women here were about that age when they entered service.”

Currently, virtually no one would be recruited for service in the rear palace at such a young age. Fourteen was about as young as one could hope to gain admittance. But Shenlü and the other women at the clinic would have entered their service during the reign of the previous emperor.

“And even now we cannot leave,” she said.

The clinic had originally been established by the woman who was now the Empress Dowager. Maomao had even seen her personally going to the

building once. At first, Maomao had assumed she'd started the clinic out of compassion, the same way the system of slavery and the making of eunuchs had been outlawed—under the Emperor's aegis, but at the Empress Dowager's instigation. The clinic had simply come first.

However, such was not the case.

"No one would take us even if we did leave," Shenlü concluded. By and large, once one had been the bedmate of an emperor, who lived "above the clouds," one couldn't leave the rear palace. True, women were sometimes married off to loyal servants or used as pawns in political matches, but even such fates as these were available only to ladies of a certain status. In another era, these women might have been put to death to accompany their master into the next life—but Maomao's position was too far below theirs to even say definitively that they were at least lucky to have escaped that fate.

Ahh... Now I see.

Here was the resentment that festered within the rear palace. It was hard to blame them if they found the palace itself repugnant; if they despised those who sought His Majesty's royal affections in pursuit of their own happiness. These women had been brought into the rear palace before their time and then had been bitten by the poisonous fangs of the former emperor. And these two facts conspired to ensure that they would never again see the world outside the walls of this complex. What must that do to a woman's heart?

Not everyone would be able to endure that experience without it battering them beyond the hope of an ordinary life. Shenlü had asked Maomao to check on the young woman who'd fallen ill at the Crystal Pavilion. Maomao had been impressed by Shenlü's perceptiveness, but there was another possible explanation, the flip side of the same facts: what if it had been Shenlü who'd taught Consort Lihua's former chief lady-in-waiting, Shin, how to make the abortifacient? Not personally, but indirectly, using the maid who'd lain in that storage room. It would make a number of things that had nagged at Maomao fall neatly into place.

The maid had surely been one of the chatty types. From her, Shenlü would have learned all about the fault line between Shin and Lihua, and might have intuited the consort's pregnancy.

"Here—leave this on the desk of the chief lady-in-waiting. It's for the consort's safety."

The maid, the earnest maid, would have listened obediently to Shenlü. It

would have been a list of things that might be bad for the consort. A list of things to be avoided—for the consort's safety. But if someone with a grudge against Lihua were to see the list, it might serve precisely the opposite of the alleged purpose. The caravan had happened to be visiting right around then; it would have been possible to finagle the items on the list if one had really wanted to.

And why would the caravan happen to have those items? One possibility:

"I'd like perfume this time."

A few words, whispered into the ear of one of the merchants who visited a few times each year. Keep up the habit over decades, and you would find that the merchandise naturally began to reflect what you wanted.

Malice, though not to the point of conscious fatal intent: that's what Maomao saw at the root of this evil. That was what had allowed it to smolder for so long, eating away at the rear palace slowly, indirectly.

The toxic face powder was one of the forms it had taken. The women at the clinic must have known about it. They couldn't all have been illiterate back when Maomao's old man had written his first list of cautions. In fact, there was a bookshelf here in this room that implied the women of the clinic were at least sometimes given to study.

I wonder if I should press her about it, Maomao thought, but quickly dropped the idea. Partly because she had no witnesses and no proof, and she didn't want to make vague accusations; but partly because of what might happen to the women here if she said anything. She was thinking of all the other ladies of the rear palace, who might be robbed of the clinic by what she said. She didn't want to do that to them.

These women's resentment would only continue to build—but that was out of Maomao's hands. The most she could do was to try to make sure that it didn't hurt those around them. That was it. Perhaps there was some better solution, but if so, Maomao wasn't smart enough to think of it.

Guess there's no point to my sticking around here. As Maomao grabbed her cloth bundle and stood up, she glanced at the bookcase. The fact that they could afford to keep books around suggested the women were receiving a pretty stipend. Maomao stood in front of the bookcase to conceal the questions she was beginning to have.

"If you're interested in our books, feel free to borrow one," Shenlü said. "Just be sure to bring it back, please."

When she put it that way, Maomao started to feel it would be rude not to pick something out.

Then Shenlü added, “It seems as if some people must do more than bring back what they borrowed... For sometimes we find more books on the shelf than there were before. It’s the oddest thing.”

“Maybe they were in someone’s way. That’s being rich for you.” There were, indeed, many less than interesting books on the shelf. Quite a few had to do with being a dutiful wife—perhaps left here by women from affluent households when their personal chambers began to feel cramped.

They could stand to have something *worth reading here*, Maomao thought, when her eyes happened to light on a single, thick volume. She took it out and opened it to discover it had a unique quality among the books on the shelf: it was illustrated. A book this large, with this many pictures? It had to have been awfully expensive. *Pictures of...bugs, no less*, she thought with a wry grin. Shisui would be thrilled to get a look at this. In fact, she was probably the only person Maomao could think of who would look at such a thing.

Maomao noticed a piece of paper tucked in between the pages. She flipped to the page, looked—and paused. It depicted a butterfly from a foreign land. A gorgeous butterfly of the night, with a color that hovered somewhere between pale blue and pale green. A figure surrounded by them would look as divine as a moon goddess. Come to think of it, Shisui had said something about seeing the insects in a book. Was this what she’d meant?

“Is this encyclopedia also something somebody brought by?”

“Oh, that? Yes, it was left here... I suppose about a month ago.”

About a month ago. Long after the emissaries had left, their banquet over. If the book hadn’t been here before that, then it seemed most natural to assume Shisui had had it.

I’m not sure it’s the sort of thing your average serving woman would own, though, Maomao thought. In fact, she was sure of it. And a book this massive would never find its way into the hands of a peasant. So what was Shisui, then? The daughter of a particularly rich merchant family? Then Maomao remembered the notebook in which Shisui had drawn pictures of insects. She’d used the back of paper that had been used to wrap snacks, but even so, obtaining a large supply of it here in the rear palace couldn’t have been easy.

Not only did she have access to paper; she was literate too. Maomao

couldn't believe someone like that would rise no higher than laundry maid. (Well, maybe Shisui's personality had held her back; that would make sense.) But then...

Maomao's thoughts were interrupted when the door to the room clattered open. A eunuch stood there.

"Shenlü." His voice was surprisingly high, for a man. "You'd best be careful." And yet surprisingly low, for a woman.

Standing in the doorway was the beautiful newcomer with the almond-shaped eyes who made the man-starved ladies of the rear palace scream and squeal. He seemed a little short for a man, and yet a little tall for a woman. Likewise his cheeks, which were a bit soft to belong to a man, yet too sharp for a woman. His left arm hung limply at his side, though Maomao thought she noted his fingers trembling.

What's his story? she wondered.

Say one were to use eyebrow black to draw shapely eyebrows on the eunuch's face. Add some passé-looking lipstick, and as for his expression—well, leave the sour look exactly how it was. Dress him in an unremarkable serving woman's outfit.

And the dead woman, Suirei, would be standing there.

Even Maomao, who had never been good at recalling faces, remembered Suirei. The woman had been too intense to forget.

"I figured it out, more or less, from what you said."

Shenlü was looking at Maomao with eyes wide.

"I suppose I should thank you. It kept me from winding up as a corpse." Her utterly emotionless tone made her seem even less feminine. Suirei closed the door, and then it was just the three of them in the room. There was a window, but it was latticework, and it wouldn't be possible to escape through it.

Should I scream? Maomao wondered. Several needles, though, gleamed in Suirei's hand, probably covered in some kind of poison. *Much as I'm curious what she used...*

Even Maomao knew this wasn't the time. She couldn't spare even a moment for a little prick to find out what symptoms the toxins might induce.

Maomao took a step back, then another, as Suirei came toward her. Then her heels bumped up against the wall.

Okay, what now? She had her cloth bundle with the bottles of alcohol and

the mugwort in it. She could throw the alcohol in Suirei's eyes and try to use the distraction to escape—but she had no idea if it would really work. Besides, she had so many questions—why Suirei was undercover here, what she was after.

Maomao might have appeared to be at a deadly disadvantage, but not so: "If you finish me off here and now, they'll find me—and you—immediately." She was Consort Gyokuyou's food taster, after all. Unlike many palace women, she would be soon and sorely missed. And her old man knew her well enough that he would have a pretty good guess where she had gone and what she had done after leaving the medical office. He and anyone with him would arrive at the school quickly enough. The real question was whether anyone would realize she'd gone to the clinic after that.

"I'd like to do this quietly, if possible." Maybe it was the male costume that gave Suirei's voice its hard edge; no one else would have realized she was a woman. But then there was that left hand, trembling.

"Is that an aftereffect of the resurrection drug?" Maomao asked. The drug, after all, essentially killed the user. Even if her body then came back to life, it might not be revived in its original state. Suirei must have known that—but she'd used the drug anyway, intent on outwitting the Emperor himself.

"What about it?" Suirei said. She was still holding the needles. She hardly needed them; she and Shenlü together could easily have subdued the physically weak Maomao. "Anyway, we have more important things to talk about. Business."

"How's that, exactly?" Maomao's heart was pounding in her ears and she was drenched in nervous sweat, but her voice still sounded dispassionate—it could be a curse or, at moments like this, a blessing. She watched the other women closely to see what they would do, trying to think one step ahead. Trying to envision a way out of there.

"You're obviously hoping to plot some way to escape, but I'd suggest you not try anything." With that, Suirei slowly opened the door again. The first thing Maomao saw was a pale hand. Suirei grabbed it and dragged its owner bodily into the room. It belonged to a tall palace woman—tall, but strikingly girlish.

"I'm sorry, Maomao..."

It was Shisui. Suirei wrapped her good arm around Shisui's neck and held the needles up to her with her shivering left hand. Shisui was obviously in

acute pain—and now she was a hostage. Maomao could only grit her teeth.

"Go ahead and try it, if you don't care what happens to her," Suirei said. She sounded like the villain in some popular stage drama. Maomao clenched her fists so hard she felt her fingernails bite into her palms. If only she could have solved this with those same fists—how simple that would be.

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Instead she asked, “What do you want?”

“You to leave this place with me.”

“And you think we’re going to get out of here alive?”

She could try using Maomao as a shield, but it wasn’t likely to do much good. And it left Maomao wondering why Suirei had gone to all the trouble of disguising herself as a eunuch to sneak in here if her only intention was to march right out again.

Suirei, her face as impassive as a doll’s, nodded. “I do. And we will.” Then she added: “You *will* come with me.”

Maomao scowled at her. Did she think a hostage would do her any good? No one would escape punishment for leaving the rear palace. Certainly not Suirei, who’d already lied her way in with a disguise. Maomao was almost disappointed: she hadn’t taken Suirei for such a shallow thinker.

At that moment, though, Suirei’s lips twisted into a smirk. “Aren’t you curious about how to make the resurrection drug?”

Maomao’s heart pounded even harder.

Damn dirty trick. She was more than certain now—Suirei was not a woman to be taken lightly.

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Chapter 9: The Fox and the Tanuki Match Wits

In the capital it was said there was a tanuki to the west and a fox to the east. In Li, the military's headquarters was located to the east, so that "the east" was sometimes used as a way of referring to the army, while "the west" meant the civil bureaucracy.

Since ancient days, people had believed that when wild animals reached a venerable age, they became supernatural spirits. Basen sometimes thought maybe that was what had happened with *these* two.

The tanuki of the west was Shishou, son of the ruler of Shihoku-shu in the north. The word "son" was somewhat misleading, though; he was in fact a son-in-law. His wife's parents had adopted him into their clan.

His family situation notwithstanding, he had found favor with the empress regnant, and thus been a weighty presence even as a young man. Though the empress regnant had been in her grave for a long time now, Shishou's corpulent figure was still prominent in the palace.

As for the fox to the east, that was Lakan, the man called the strategist. Though he himself came from a family of long-standing renown, his power and privilege couldn't touch Shishou's. Nonetheless, there was a tacit understanding among the officialdom: Lakan was the one man with whom one, under no circumstances, picked a fight.

Basen's father had taught him that he shouldn't let his own bias control him, but sometimes it was impossible to avoid. Faced with the tanuki and the fox, Basen could only stand trembling.

What should we do? he tried to ask his master with his eyes. No, not his master; in fact, he might have felt less nervous if his master had been present. But the masked figure with him wasn't the august personage whom the rear palace knew as Jinshi. The long robe hid platform shoes that added almost three *sun*, or ten centimeters, of height, while cotton was stuffed into the shoulders of the robe to make them appear wider. It all concealed the

person's true size and shape rather nicely, transforming them from someone who was altogether too short for the job into a natural body double for Jinshi—or rather, for the Imperial younger brother.

Basen's companion carried himself with a certain self-importance. Well—there was the hunched back, and the air of reluctance, but it was very much the personality expected of the Imperial younger brother. Anyone would believe it was him.

If the other side had a tanuki and a fox, Basen's side had a dog—not a mangy cur, either, but something more like a proud hunting dog.

"And what business do you bring?" Basen spoke on behalf of his temporary master. The man wore a mask because he was self-conscious about burns to his face that he had sustained when he was a young boy. He rarely spoke in public, but if he ever did so, that story would be more than enough to explain things if anyone thought his voice sounded odd.

He spent much of his time cooped up in his chambers doing paperwork; it had been nearly a month since he'd appeared at the court council. Even now, he simply sat in his seat, giving no indication that he would speak. But that was fine. That was how it had to be.

He very rarely sent a stand-in to the council. When he did, it was only to submit the paperwork he'd done. The more obtuse the Emperor's younger brother seemed, the better. It was what the heir himself wanted, and the ruler allowed it. Why, exactly—for what purpose they would prefer and allow it—was not something Basen was in a position to wonder about.

"Oh, heavens, it's simply that we're graced with such an unusual presence today; I thought perhaps a spot of tea might be a nice idea. We still have plenty of time until the military council," said Lakan. To be precise, *he* had plenty of time until the military council; Basen hadn't said anything about his master's schedule. Far be it from Lakan, however, to show consideration for another's calendar. "I thought perhaps Sir Shishou might wish to join us, since he's here today."

Behind Lakan was a subordinate holding a bottle. It looked like imported grape wine, but no doubt there was only fruit juice inside. Basen's father had mentioned to him that the monocled eccentric was a featherweight drinker.

"Who, me?" the wily old tanuki smiled. Basen didn't know what Shishou carried around in that portly belly of his—only that one had to be forever on one's guard, for it might be something harmful to him and his. Normally, he

might have weaseled out of the invitation easily enough. Basen thought that even the eccentric military commander couldn't and wouldn't simply manhandle a man of higher station than himself. At least, he sincerely hoped not.

The tanuki, however, proved far more accommodating than he had expected. "I'm afraid I don't have any particularly interesting stories to share over a drink, though," he said.

That put Basen on the spot. Thinking that the only thing to do was refuse, he opened his mouth—but then he felt a tug on his sleeve. It was the masked body double, stopping him. Did that mean he wanted to hear what the men had to say? Then Basen would have to accept the invitation, even if it was only at the body double's behest. He took a step backward. "Shall we go to the inner courtyard, then?" He couldn't imagine what his "master" was thinking, but Basen was a servant, and that meant he would serve.

The central courtyard was rife with signs of autumn. The osmanthus blossoms gave off a powerful aroma. It was sweet, but Basen didn't like it much. The strategist, however, chose an open-air pavilion right near the flowers, then instructed a minion to prepare silver cups.

The three of them sat around a circular stone table, eyeing each other like the snake who feared the slug who feared the frog who feared the snake. Basen stood behind the masked lord.

"Truth be told, this is best savored out of a delicate glass vessel—more fragrant, and lovelier on the eyes," Lakan said, pouring some juice from his bottle—a light-green liquid. It did indeed have a cloying fragrance that mingled with the smell of the osmanthus. Basen wondered if he ought to taste the drink for poison, but it seemed the silver cups were intended to avoid the need for that. The strategist arranged the three cups before him, allowing the other two men to pick their drinks first before he drank down the contents of the remaining cup in a single swallow.

This demonstration left the others with no excuse not to drink themselves, so the tanuki and Basen's temporary master both brought their cups to their lips. The latter pulled his mask down to drink, then tugged on Basen's sleeve.

"He says it tastes lovely and refreshing," Basen said. The most secluded princess, one suspected, wouldn't have been as reticent as the man in the mask. The thought almost made Basen want to smile—but if the man with him were to speak in this situation, his true identity might be discovered.

The strategist had been looking at the masked lord with amusement for some time now. Basen thought he seemed to have some kind of mischief in mind, but he didn't know what it could be.

The old tanuki swirled his cup, enjoying the aroma, then drank. Just for a second, his expression was one of distaste, but then, the drink really did need a glass vessel to bring out its full aroma.

Seeing that the others had finished their refreshments, Lakan took a piece of paper out of the folds of his robe. The other two leaned in; grinning, Lakan unfolded the paper.

Basen nearly choked when he saw what it was, but he managed to maintain his composure and looked around as calmly as he could. The tanuki, the fox, and the dog each had one attendant; otherwise, there was no one here. Yet even so, how could he display something like that so proudly?

The paper contained a plan for a feifa firearm, drawn in great detail. Not a traditional feifa such as Basen had used in the past, either, but one of the latest models, small and light. Presumably, the plan had been prepared by analyzing the weapon used to attack his real master on the hunt recently.

"I believe this is one of the newest models from the west. Observe! This is the real innovation—no more fuse," Lakan said, pointing to the weapon's trigger. The end of the hammer appeared to have not a fuse, but something else. Basen looked at it, somewhat perplexed.

"Maybe it's not so easy to tell from the picture, but there's a flint attached here," Lakan said, the eye behind his monocle squinting. "It obviates the need for a fuse. Fewer misfires, and remarkably simple construction."

"Most impressive." Shishou stroked his beard. His expression, though, was inscrutable.

"Yes indeed—if we were to mass-produce these, we could revolutionize the organization of the army. Tighter, more mobile formations—it would be beautiful. Like a Lance that can move horizontally."

By "Lance," he seemed to be referring to a Shogi piece. If one could take a piece that could only attack forward and give it lateral movement, what a threat it would be.

"To think, a weapon like this in the hands of rogues who would dare endanger the heir's life," Lakan said. He shook his head dramatically, but there was still a smile on his lips. He was enjoying this—even the somewhat oblivious Basen could tell.

“Strange indeed,” said Shishou. “How do you suppose the fiends got their hands on such implements?”

“Excellent question. I thought it was your job to answer it,” Lakan said.

“In principle, yes, but... Well, I’m sorry to say that the person in charge of getting that answer from those who might know it got a little overenthusiastic, and now I’m afraid none of them will be telling us anything.”

It was easy enough to guess what the person had gotten overenthusiastic about. Criminals, let alone would-be assassins of a member of the royal family, had no rights. Still, to get that “overenthusiastic” about torturing people who were supposed to provide valuable information was a major misstep. Were Shishou’s people really that bad at their jobs?

“If only we could at least figure out their point of origin.” Lakan crossed his arms, then produced a paper-wrapped parcel from his sleeve. It appeared to be a slice of mooncake; he took a bite, chewed noisily, and swallowed, some crumbs catching in the stubble that covered his chin. The attendant who stood behind him watched with exasperation. “I wonder if you might not have heard anything.” The sweet smell of the snack added itself to the melange of osmanthus and fruit juice. Lakan’s eyes were sparkling, and he was smiling as if this entire exercise amused him.

“If I’d learned anything of the sort I would have reported it long ago,” Shishou replied, swishing the remaining contents of his cup. He made no move to drink them, but only looked at them.

“Is that so? Such a shame,” Lakan said, and sighed mightily. Then he tucked the blueprints back in his robe and pulled out a different piece of paper instead. “To our real business, then.”

Basen was surprised: the matter of the feifa wasn’t what Lakan had really wanted to talk about? The strategist’s machinations could chill the blood, leaving Basen to wonder what he could possibly have in mind. That was when he unfurled the next piece of paper, revealing a diagram covered in white and black numbered circles.

Before he could stop himself, Basen said, “I— Is that...?” The face of the attendant standing behind Lakan had taken on a distant, detached aspect that somehow reminded Basen of his father Gaoshun. No doubt this man had his own struggles; Basen sympathized deeply with him.

“It’s a diagram of the game of Go my wife and I played yesterday.”

“W-Wife?”

Yes, he’d heard the stories, the rumors that the eccentric Lakan had bought out some prostitute from the pleasure district. They claimed the price he’d paid for her could have bought a small castle, and that the pleasure district had celebrated for ten days and ten nights.

Lakan’s face became that of a man waxing lyrical about his beloved, and it was obvious that the change wasn’t lost on the others. The masked lord’s shoulders were quivering, while the tanuki was clearly trying to think of some way to escape.

“Another game like a clash between two finely honed blades. Oh, I can’t tell you how many times my pulse began to race as we played...” Lakan was saying. Basen still had a lot to learn about relations between men and women, but he knew that the strategist had a skewed idea of what they should be like. He rolled straight on through his panegyric: “I never dreamed she would try a move like *this* in the mid-game. I escaped by the skin of my teeth, but she came at me again with the next stone.”

Lakan was in his glory now, his face flushed. But he was talking about a game of Go, and as Basen had no interest in board games, the entire thing went straight over his head. Or at any rate, he failed to understand what was so exciting about it.

Just as he was beginning to wonder how long the monologue would go on, the tanuki stood up. “I apologize for interrupting your fine speech, but I have work to attend to. Thank you for the drink.”

“Such a shame. It was a fine game, a fine game indeed. I’ll be sure to have a copy of the diagram sent to you along with a booklet of my commentary.”

“Thank you, but you needn’t trouble yourself.” The idea was more than even the tanuki could bear.

“Oh, it’s no trouble, no trouble at all, Sir Shishou. I’ll even include the diagram from my previous game, and I do hope you’ll have a look at them.”

He was very good at foisting things on people; one had to give him that. Shishou, apparently deciding that it would be easier just to play along, finally nodded.

Lakan laughed. “Ha ha ha. You see, there was no need to argue. Ah, yes, how about I throw this in too? I would love for you to enjoy its lovely *red* in a glass cup. We do so enjoy talking with each other; it would be wonderful to sit down and have a nice, long chat with you about our wives.”

"Indeed."

"As I said, I wish you would rethink things."

Hmm, thought Basen. The masked lord seemed to think the same thing, for his shoulders shifted slightly. Shishou, however, said nothing further, but simply left the pavilion. Basen glanced into the silver cup he'd left behind; there was still a mouthful of juice left in it.

"An unusual color, no? Believe it or not, some grapes in the world are green," Lakan said. The juice was a light-green color. Certainly not red. "It's just like my great-uncle said," Lakan continued, putting the last of the mooncake into his mouth and washing it down with a mouthful of juice. "Now, continuing from move 180," he said, resuming his commentary.

Of the four people left in the pavilion, three of them wore distant, glassy expressions.

It was a full hour later that Basen and his temporary master returned to the office; though they had hardly moved, they felt immensely tired.

"All right if I fix my hair?"

"Go ahead. Take your time; I'll stand guard."

Basen and the masked lord were alone in the room. The questioning voice, the first thing the masked lord had said all day, sounded a little high for a man.

The mask came off, revealing a single braid of lovely hair pressing against a cheek. The face in profile was slim and classically lovely; Basen had been told this person was the same age as his father, Gaoshun, but they looked at least ten years younger. Even without the platform shoes, they would have been a good five shaku and seven sun tall, 170 centimeters or so. Standing up straight, they could easily have passed for a particularly handsome civil official.

Nobody would have believed that until the year before, this person had lived in the rear palace; indeed, had been one of the four favored consorts.

Namely, the former Pure Consort, Ah-Duo.

"The fox is such a freak that the tanuki looks downright normal in comparison," she said bluntly, then sat at the desk and regarded the papers piled on it. Most of them were the work Basen's real master dealt with, but mixed in among them were secret missives from the Emperor.

"There aren't many who can prevail against the strategist."

“He seems to have a soft spot for his wife, though.”

“...And his daughter.”

Basen thought about that very daughter and sighed deeply. He wanted to be an official like his father, but he didn’t want to be run-down with work like him. It seemed, though, that Basen’s personality already tended that way.

Basen thought the reason his master made himself so involved with the girl was most likely because of her father. The girl herself was of illegitimate birth, but her father had only one other immediate family member, a nephew he’d adopted. If his master could bring the young woman into his circle, it might give him some leverage over the fox-strategist.

Basen doubted it would be so easy, though. The very fact that the girl was the strategist’s daughter made her tricky to handle; and indeed, the reason Ah-Duo had been needed so suddenly this morning to stand in for his master had something to do with her. Namely, the girl called Maomao hadn’t come home. Consort Gyokuyou had reported her missing last night.

“What do you suppose would happen if anyone found out?”

“Don’t even say it.”

Ah-Duo’s tone was teasing, but Basen could only clutch his head in his hands. It made him fear for his hairline—afraid he truly was heading down the same path as his father.

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Chapter 10: Traces

"Maomao still hasn't come back."

That was the gist of the letter that had arrived for Jinshi the night before. It had been worded more elaborately than that (formality demanded as much), but there had been an unmistakable urgency to the handwriting. He assumed the writer had been the Jade Pavilion's chief lady-in-waiting, meaning she must have been frazzled indeed. This was the woman whom his own nursemaid Suiren had praised as "highly capable" after doing a stint at the Jade Pavilion when Jinshi took Maomao back for a while.

To be perfectly honest, Jinshi thought the girl would be fine on her own for a night. She slipped out from time to time—he'd witnessed it himself more than once—but she was usually back by morning. Which was why he found this entire thing surprising.

When he arrived at the Jade Pavilion, the longer-serving ladies-in-waiting watched him apprehensively. They were going through the motions, but they seemed distracted. The newer girls, however, were working industriously.

He entered the living room to find Consort Gyokuyou reclining on a generous couch. Princess Lingli was playing in another room. The chief lady-in-waiting, Hongniang, was there, her face set. Gyokuyou held a folding fan in front of her mouth, though she looked more or less as she usually did.

"You look well, milady," Jinshi said.

"Hardly," Gyokuyou replied, making clear that she was not going to waste any time on formalities. Evidently, she was less phlegmatic about the situation than she appeared. "I thought you must have absconded with her again, but it seems I was wrong about that, at least."

"Honestly, milady, have I ever done anything so rude?" The truth was, Jinshi shared her disquiet.

"I wonder if she's gone and stuck her nose into some new dangerous goings-on," Gyokuyou said.

"Do we know what she was doing?"

"Yes, until noon the day before yesterday," Hongniang broke in. She

explained that Maomao had gone to the medical office to prepare the mugwort for the moxibustion. Luomen had explained about his list of health-related provisions for the rear palace, and said Maomao had been very much in favor of the idea.

"So perhaps she went to the institute for practical studies," Luomen had said, and the old eunuch who ran the place confirmed that Maomao had in fact been there. But after that, it was as if she had vanished.

She had gone to get the mugwort, then proceeded to the school. Where had she gone after that?

"I can only think she was caught up in something," Hongniang said. She looked calm enough, but there was a hint of distress in her manner, and an evident desire to defend Maomao. "I checked the most suspicious places, but there was nothing." And Hongniang was, after all, Gyokuyou's serving woman. She couldn't go making a commotion on her own. She had to rely on Jinshi.

Jinshi crossed his arms and grunted. It was hard to imagine anything that would inspire Maomao to disappear of her own accord. She could be brusque at times, but she understood her place. Likewise, she had a way of underestimating her own value, but she certainly knew that simply leaving her mistress without permission would bring down punishment. There was either some specific circumstance preventing her from coming home, or else she had simply been rendered incapable of returning. It was the worst thing he could think of.

"Do you suppose anyone had some kind of grudge against her?" Gyokuyou inquired. With more than two thousand women and a thousand eunuchs at the rear palace, there were bound to be one or two people a person didn't get along with, and sometimes such differences could conceivably spill over into actual harm.

"Grudges? Against her? Plenty, I assume," Hongniang said.

They all fell silent. The fact that no one could deny it was unsettling. Some of the women of the Crystal Pavilion, particularly, probably had it out for Maomao.

"Maomao wouldn't be able to resist physical force," Gyokuyou said. The young lady was quite well versed in poisons, but she was small and not physically strong. "If a whole group attacked her, she'd be dead."

"Yes, that's true," Gaoshun said, his brow furrowing. "But I somehow

doubt she would travel to the next life alone...”

They all fell silent again. Everyone in the room knew Maomao well enough to know that even in the face of physical violence, she wouldn’t go quietly. She would set that mind of hers working and find some way to take at least one of her attackers with her.

“At present, however, there’s no discernible reason for her disappearance —and that means she will have to be punished,” Jinshi said. Maomao was frequently granted special treatment, but unfortunately, they had to draw the line somewhere. “Having said that,” he continued, “before we can punish her, we must find her.” The best thing, he decided, would be to retrace her steps once more.

When they arrived at the medical office, the doctor with the thin mustache welcomed them with tea, but he seemed depressed. Luomen was writing something calmly. When Jinshi and his group showed up, he came over to greet them, dragging one leg.

“You must be here about Maomao.” Luomen was quite perceptive. They seemed more likely to get useful information out of him than from the moping doctor.

“I’d like you to tell your story again,” Jinshi said.

“Of course,” Luomen said, and proceeded to outline the events simply but clearly. Unfortunately, it yielded no information Jinshi hadn’t heard at the Jade Pavilion.

“Is that everything?”

“It is, sir.”

Jinshi was beginning to get irritated. Gaoshun alerted him with a nudge that he was tapping his foot noisily. Knowing he had to do something, Jinshi looked around the medical office. “What about the other Maomao? Isn’t the cat here today?”

“I believe she’s out on a walk.” It was (for some reason) Gaoshun who answered, sounding dispirited. Jinshi was aware that his attendant had been quietly bringing a fish along each time they came to the rear palace recently.

Jinshi had thought petting that furball might help him feel a little better— of all the times for her not to be here.

“Usually, this is about when she comes around to beg for food,” the doctor said.

“True, she is a little late,” Luomen agreed. The two of them looked at each other.

“Come to think of it, when the young lady left here, Maomao was practically plastered to her,” the doctor said, stroking his chin. That at least was new information, though not of great consequence. Of course cats would play around with whoever was there.

Luomen, though, said, “Is that how she looked to you?”

“Good question. She was sticking awfully close, not really playing around. That was just when you went to use the restroom, Luomen. The young lady said something about the consort sleeping lightly.”

Luomen didn’t say anything, but went over to the medicine cabinet and gazed at its panoply of drawers. At length he opened one and placed some dried berries on a piece of wrapping paper. “Did she happen to take any of these with her?”

“Hmm... I’m sorry to say I don’t remember,” the doctor confessed. He looked into the drawer. “I do feel like there used to be more of them in there. Maybe she did take some.”

Luomen nodded, then turned to Jinshi. “Forgive me, but might I be permitted to go look for our kitten?” Then, still looking supremely calm, he added, “It might afford us the chance to find the other Maomao as well.” Evidently he had some kind of idea.

In that, Jinshi reflected, Maomao and her adoptive father very much resembled each other.

“And what purpose will finding this cat serve?”

“It may serve no purpose at all. We’ll have to see,” Luomen said. He walked along, dragging his leg—his kneecap had been removed when he had been banished from the rear palace. Punishment for the death of the heir to the throne, the current Emperor’s firstborn son. Children, it must be noted, died all the time. To be mutilated and banished for such an occurrence could only be attributed to Luomen’s bad luck.

Now the eunuch studied the strange berries in his hand, the herbal medicine he’d taken from the medicine cabinet. “This is a good specimen,” he commented. “Still fresh. The aroma is still strong.”

He looked around. Gaoshun was walking behind Jinshi, carrying a fish. He occasionally offered a quiet “Meeow,” but Jinshi pretended not to hear

him. If Basen had seen his father this way, the blood would have drained from his face. Gaoshun did everything he could to play the serious father in front of his son.

The other eunuchs split up to look for the cat.

"Cats' territories typically aren't that large," Luomen said. An animal wasn't likely to roam more than half a li; individual variations aside, of course. "They might range a little farther when in heat, but our kitten is still young enough that we may not have to worry about that. However—"

He was interrupted by a voice from behind. "Master Jinshi, we found her," one of the eunuchs said. They followed him.

They were in the northern quarter of the rear palace, but parts of the area were separated from the southern quarter by only a single wall, which had holes small enough for a kitten to sneak through. The animal, he'd been informed, had originally been found not far from the wall.

When they got to the kitten, she was rolling back and forth on the ground, stretched out pathetically by the roots of the tree. The roots showed signs that she'd scratched at them, and some small berries lay on the ground beside her. Jinshi crouched down and scratched Maomao under the chin. She squinted with pleasure, then turned over and went to sleep.

"So she's been sleeping?" Jinshi asked. It looked almost as if she was drunk.

"Look at these," Luomen said, picking up some of the berries. They resembled the medicine he'd brought along. He looked at them closely, then studied the scratch marks on the tree. There was another berry inside the hollow of the tree—and when he reached inside, he came up with a scrap of paper.

"Maomao must have done this," he said. He opened the scrap of paper, but there was nothing written on it.

"Yes, but what was she trying to tell us?" Jinshi said archly.

"We'll have to go back to the medical office to find out," Luomen replied, and then he bent down, scooped up Maomao, and started walking.

One thing Maomao and Luomen had in common was that you never knew what they were going to do next. They both seemed to believe that showing was better than telling, or at least better than explaining in advance what they had in mind. Demonstration was the quickest way for the intelligent to

explain something to the less gifted.

"This is catnip," Luomen was saying. "It's a feline favorite and induces a state much like drunkenness. You can make a tea with it that protects against chills and encourages good sleep."

Maomao must have intended it for Consort Gyokuyou. Then, when she'd suddenly found herself in dire straits, she'd put it to good use. The chances that they would find it hadn't been very good—maybe no one would notice the stuff. But here it was, a message left by Maomao. Perhaps she'd relied on the likelihood that Luomen would figure it out. The others were starting to see why she admired him so much.

Now Luomen took out the piece of paper. Surely it must have some significance, even though there was nothing written on it.

"This is a little game she always used to love," Luomen said. He lit a candle from an asbestos-wrapped flint, the room filling with a rich aroma of honey. He took the paper and singed it slightly—whereupon letters appeared on it. The flame quickly became very eager, and Luomen jerked the page away from the fire. "If you write on a piece of paper using fruit juice or tea, the letters are slightly more flammable than the paper, so they appear when the surface is passed over a flame. On this occasion...it would appear she used alcohol."

"Ah, yes, she did take some of our distilled spirits with her," the doctor piped up. It would have been nice of him to mention that sooner.

In any case, that meant that the writing caught fire first, making it visible. And as for the message they could now see...

"Is that the character for...*small shrine*?" the doctor said. "It's too messy to read. I think you let it burn too much."

"My apologies," Luomen said, though it hadn't really been under his control.

The paper contained just two characters: the one for *roadside shrine*, and one more. Presumably, that was all Maomao had been able to dash off in the moments she'd had available to her. At least this strengthened the speculation that she'd been prevented from coming back to the Jade Pavilion against her will. And this abstruse trick had been the best thing she could manage to let them know what was going on.

"*Are* there any shrines in that area?" Luomen inquired.

"We're going to find out," Jinshi said.

The Shrine of Choosing was only the start: the northern quarter was dotted with old buildings. There could very well be a shrine or two there, but even Jinshi, who'd been in and around the rear palace for years, couldn't be sure.

Then there was the other character on the piece of paper, tantalizingly almost legible. It was a bit of a shapeless blob; perhaps Maomao had tried to use a simplified form to save time. It didn't help that whatever she had written had been partially blackened by the flame.

"What could it be?" Jinshi muttered.

"I'm afraid I haven't the slightest," the doctor said.

Maybe they should try the Jade Pavilion; Gyokuyou or the others might be able to shed some light on it.

"I don't know how much hope we can hold out, though," Jinshi said.

"I wonder." Luomen blew out the candle and calmly put it away. He seemed unhurried, in contrast to the fidgety, anxious doctor.

"Are you not worried about her?" Jinshi asked. Could Luomen, despite his gentle appearance, actually have a heart of stone?

"Worried? I am. But I will simply do what I can do. I wouldn't want the tasks I must attend to to suffer because I was in a tizzy." He began taking out some medicines. "Besides, I once went an entire year without a word from her."

Jinshi was quiet. Luomen must have meant the year after his daughter had been taken by the "lady hunters." What could Jinshi do in the face of such a remark but keep his peace? He thought back to when Maomao had been a maid, working away, unable to communicate with the pleasure district. It made him realize that father and daughter did share some strange commonalities.

He could see that even without Maomao here, he needn't worry about Consort Gyokuyou. If she wanted a food taster, he was prepared to offer Suiren again. He imagined there was a good chance that the Jade Pavilion's ladies would reject that idea, however. Hongniang herself had looked practically terrified.

Jinshi left the medical office, moving quicker than usual as he made for Gyokuyou's residence.

"Master Jinshi..." Gaoshun was looking at him sourly.

"I know." He slowed down to a regal walk, greeting the occasional smiles

from the women who passed by with graciousness—the perfect noble.

"Sloppy writing," Hongniang remarked, scrunching up her brow.

"I would say more like written hurriedly—without the time for careful calligraphy. The scorches don't help, but the characters themselves are a bit blobby." This cool assessment came from Gyokuyou. Princess Lingli was by her feet, playing with wooden blocks. "Hrm," the consort grumbled. "I wonder what it could say?"

"I think it looks a little like the character for *wings*."

"No, no. The bottom half of the character isn't crowded enough for that."

"Yes, but Maomao's writing has always had a certain...peculiar charm."

Well, then maybe a fresh set of eyes (or three) could help to decipher the writing. Hongniang promptly summoned the other ladies-in-waiting. However, even Yinghua, Guiyuan, and Ailan weren't able to agree on what they were seeing.

"Oh, I think it says *next*."

"Hmm. That's close, but I don't quite think so."

"Yeah, I feel like there's more to it than that."

Then the lady-in-waiting with the white hairband spoke up: "It looks like *wings* or *next* to me too."

"I agree with my sister," said the woman with the black hairband.

The last of them, the girl with the red hairband, was staring at the paper as if her gaze might burn a hole right through it. "Don't you think this says *jade*?" she asked. That character certainly did look that way, a bit like a cross between the ones for *wings* and *next*. "See here? It's a little swoopier than usual; normally this stroke would be straight down."

"Yes, I could see it. But what do you suppose it means?" Gyokuyou said. "Is it a reference to the Jade Pavilion?"

The debate started immediately: "Maybe, but what would be the point of referring to this place?"

Meanwhile, Seki-u was scrunching up her nose. "Shisui...?" she said suddenly.

Everyone stopped and looked at her; she shivered under their collective gaze.

"What's that?"

"U-Uh, um, it's...a name. The name of a maid who was with Maomao."

It wasn't a particularly unusual name; it was frequently written with characters meaning *purple* and *jade* or otherwise *offspring* and *jade*. It could be the name of practically anybody in the rear palace.

But Jinshi remembered someone else in connection with that character, *sui*. "I believe there was a girl called Xiaolan who was often with them," he said. He'd seen them together before. A palace woman with the aspect of a friendly squirrel. (Much as he was surprised to realize Maomao was actually friends with some other girls.)

"Find that serving woman!" he commanded his eunuchs. They immediately left the room.

"Master Jinshi," Gaoshun said. Suddenly, Jinshi realized his face was hard-set, his fists clenched so tightly that his nails were leaving impressions in his palms.

He tried to put his mask back on, but without much success.

Sometime later, a shrine was discovered near where they'd found the kitten. A dilapidated construct tucked in the shadow of a storehouse, it might have remained hidden forever if no one had been specifically looking for it. The shrine, it turned out, was the entrance to a tunnel. A passage constructed out of one of the old, unused waterways.

They learned one more thing, as well: there were no women registered in the rear palace with the name Seki-u had come up with. "Shisui" was nowhere to be found, and one of the new eunuchs was missing too.

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Chapter 11: The Fox Village

Maomao could feel them being carried along by the current. *Ugh, the rocking...* She leaned against a post, somehow managing to fight off a wave of nausea. She must have been in the ship's hold, because she was surrounded by cargo. The entire place smelled damp and humid.

"Wonder where we're going," Shisui said, not sounding unduly concerned.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

They weren't restrained, but Suirei, still in her male outfit, stood guard outside. Maomao and Shisui were no longer dressed like palace women, but instead in simple clothes like any village girl might wear. Suirei had preempted any questions from the sailors on the ship by explaining that the two young women were to be sold. Posing as a procurer was certainly the most natural cover for her. A good excuse to lock them in the hold and keep anyone from asking questions.

They were on a ship. That meant they weren't at the rear palace. They were outside.

Back at the clinic, Maomao had decided to accept Suirei's conditions. She'd been alone and defenseless, and if she'd chosen to resist, the other woman would probably have silenced her permanently. (In other words, she was certainly *not* merely drawn in by the thought of the resurrection drug, thank you very much.)

Thus, Maomao had allowed Suirei to lead her away. The eunuchs had been too busy with work to notice her—and anyway, a palace woman walking around was hardly anything unusual. Suirei had brought her to a place not far from where they'd first found Maomao the kitten, close behind a wall. Maomao finally started to breathe a little easier. Shenlü kept watch while Suirei jimmied something on the shrine. It was during that brief moment that Maomao had scrawled her message in alcohol on the paper. She'd concealed the items in her robe as they left.

Shisui had asked "Maomao?" causing her to mess up the second character

and leaving it hard to read. She was just daubing more alcohol on her finger, hoping to rewrite the message, when Suirei turned around. Maomao quickly stuffed the paper in the knot of a nearby tree, pressing the catnip on top of it to keep it there.

I really hope my old man notices that, she thought. If anything she had done got his attention in the slightest, then he wouldn't stop until he had teased out the rest. That was simply how he was. Unfortunately, the only person who had seen Maomao take the catnip had been the quack doctor, so she was less than confident about how things would work out. It wasn't the quack's fault; he was what he was. But that didn't bring her any comfort.

Beneath the shrine was a hole big enough for a person to fit into. If nothing else, she finally knew now how the kitten had gotten into the rear palace. It looked like a gloomy, uncared-for water passage, but it seemed a little large for that. Maomao speculated that whoever had built the underground water system had made some emergency escape paths while they were at it.

They passed through the tunnel to the outside of the rear palace, where a horse and carriage was already waiting for them; they took it directly to the port. Then they cast off onto the sea, and now Maomao was rocking on her way to who knew where.

No idea what's going to happen to us... Maomao, wondering what if anything she ought to do, glanced at Shisui. Could she figure out some way for the two of them to escape together? *Doubt it*, she thought, tugging at some sailcloth lying nearby. It was dusty and stiff, but she could ball it up to make a passable pillow. It looked likely to have ticks, though, so she gave it a decent pounding, partly just to make herself feel better. When they'd given her her new clothes, they'd confiscated all her alcohol. The only thing she'd been left was her hair stick, which was still in her hair.

"Sleepy?" Shisui asked.

"Yeah."

"Me too..." She laid her head on the edge of the sailcloth, and then for once that notorious chatterbox didn't make a sound.

The boat seemed to have left the sea and entered a river. The smell of spray had lessened, replaced by an ever more noticeable aroma of earth. They changed vessels twice as the river became narrower and narrower, and when

they finally made landfall, it turned out they were in the middle of a forest. The river ran right into it, and someone had built a dock in the woods.

"Time to walk," Suirei announced, and Maomao and Shisui followed her. The girls' hands had been tied with rope, too thick to get through without a knife. Along with Suirei, they were accompanied by two men who looked distinctly like guards. Rope or no rope, Maomao doubted they could have escaped.

This doesn't make any sense. From the position of the sun and the way the temperature had dropped, the boat had clearly been traveling north. But as they worked their way through the woods, she thought she felt herself getting warmer, and unaccountable clamminess entered the air.

"This way." Suirei, still in disguise, looked like a prince who'd walked off the scroll of some fairy tale; she could have made a perfect couple with the pretty young Shisui, at least if the latter could have managed to act more demure. Shisui, for her part, was looking this way and that at all the bugs that darted by as they walked along. Maomao liked to think that she wasn't as far gone as Shisui, but she wasn't above keeping an eye out for any interesting herbs and grasses as they went.

Her ruminations were interrupted when Suirei flinched back and then edged to the left. *What's with her?* Maomao wondered. Shisui immediately shifted to the right. Maomao eyed them both, perplexed. Then a snake slithered out from among the trees, big and fat and ready for the approaching winter. *Is she afraid of snakes?*

That would make sense enough. No matter how cool someone might act, there were bound to be one or two things that got under their skin. It was the way Shisui had reacted, though, that really got Maomao's attention. It might have been simple coincidence, but Maomao was starting to form a very firm hunch.

Almost before she knew what she was doing, Maomao had slipped off the path and grabbed the squirming reptile. Before the guards could make a move, she threw it at Suirei. It dropped right at her feet. The woman began to sink down, her face deathly pale.

"Maomao!" Shisui exclaimed, immediately grabbing the snake and flinging it away again. She stroked Suirei's back; the disguised woman looked strange, her pupils dilated and her breath coming in short gasps.

Well, this isn't good, Maomao thought. She went over and touched

Suirei's back. She didn't rub it, but tapped on it slowly, silently encouraging her to breathe in time with the rhythm. Suirei's breath gradually slowed down. The guards made a move toward the three of them, but Shisui held up a hand to stop them.

That was when Maomao was sure.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Suirei asked when she had finally calmed down.

"Just a little prank."

"Sure seemed like more than that." Suirei stood up and looked around, letting out a breath of relief when she was sure there were no more snakes nearby.

"So you and Shisui know each other," Maomao said.

Suirei managed not to react openly to this accusation. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"It seems to me Shisui received a higher-class education than she lets on. And she occasionally betrays signs of good breeding." Someone like her would never do minion work like laundry. She would just hang around the baths, giving massages and liking bugs, and giving no hint that she was who she was.

"There's any number of maids like that. Just like you," Suirei said.

"Just like me," huh? Evidently she'd done her homework about who Maomao was.

"I guess you must have been pretty surprised when a kitten appeared from your secret tunnel," Maomao said to Shisui. "So surprised that in your haste to catch it, you let yourself be discovered by another palace woman."

"Ha ha! You're a sharp one, Maomao," Shisui laughed. "So you were trying to be sure. But look, please don't throw any more snakes around. My older sister really hates them." Shisui scratched her cheek with one of her bound hands.

For the first time, Maomao thought she saw Suirei's expression soften. "I told you your name was too simple," she said as if admonishing the younger woman. There was no sense of alarm in her tone; rather, she seemed unbothered that Maomao now knew their secret.

"Aw, none of the other girls noticed it," Shisui said. Many of the lowest serving women were illiterate and wouldn't give another person's name much thought. Even if they could read, they came from all over, and might

not even all read a particular name the same way. Shisui had probably leaned on those assumptions when picking it. A bold move.

Maomao was about to say something else, but then thought better of it. She still wasn't sure. She decided to skip it for now.

Maomao had first met Shisui near where they'd found the kitten. In the end, they'd never figured out how Maomao (the cat) had gotten into the rear palace, but if she'd come via a secret tunnel, that would explain a good deal. When they'd exited the old underground waterway, Maomao had noticed a cat living nearby. Maomao (the cat again) must have gotten lost and wandered into the tunnel once when Shisui had been looking for the passageway.

Then there was the fact that her upbringing seemed too refined for a mere maid. Shisui had presumably been trying to be careful to act her part, but she hadn't been careful enough. Then again, she probably hadn't expected anyone to watch her as closely as Maomao had.

And when Shisui had started bringing Maomao and Xiaolan to the bathhouse? An excellent excuse to make contact with Suirei, who was disguised as one of the eunuchs who brought the bathwater. She'd played them all for fools.

"Guess I'm not much of a spy," Shisui said.

"Just have to be more careful next time," Maomao assured her, but the light banter didn't change the position she was in. She still had no idea what the other two planned to do with her.

*Do they want to use me as a bargaining chip against...*him*?* She thought of the monocled strategist and immediately frowned. Talk about wandering right into a snake pit. Nothing good could come of it. Didn't they realize that?

"Why did you come with us, if you knew all that?" Suirei asked.

"Why did you bring me?" Maomao replied. Surely she could be allowed this small, flippant remark. She was emboldened by the realization that they weren't going to kill her here and now.

Suirei said nothing, merely resumed walking. Maomao followed her. It seemed the matter was to be shelved for the moment. They did at least cut the rope binding Maomao's hands—not because she was now welcome to try to escape, but because any attempt at escape was obviously futile.

They trooped through the woods, crunching twigs and dry leaves

underfoot, until something resembling a house came into view, flanked by what appeared to be fields. The trees began to thin out, and then they could see a clearing surrounded by a wooden palisade.

A hidden village? That was what it seemed like, anyway. She would never have expected to find a human settlement out here in the woods, but there it was. Complete with a barrier to keep out wild animals. The palisade stretched around the perimeter of the village, making it look rather like the rear palace, even if on a different scale.

Suirei produced a red cloth from the folds of her robe and waved it three times at someone standing on a watchtower. A moment later, the gate opened and a bridge came down. Suirei led Shisui and Maomao into the village.

Maomao was immediately hit by steamy air. *Huh. No wonder it's warm.* She saw steam everywhere, rising from water channels that crisscrossed the village.

"A hot-springs town?"

"Uh-huh. Why else would we build a village way out here?" Shisui said. Well, there you had it.

Other than the somewhat unusual location, the village looked like any other hot-springs town. It was dotted with unremarkable buildings, and people wearing light robes and carrying towels walked this way and that. One in particular stood out.

A foreigner?

This person wore a veil over their head, but the build of their body and the look of their hair made it obvious that they weren't from around here, an impression confirmed by the western-style accessories they wore. What really got Maomao's attention, though, was the tie in the hair that flowed out from under the veil. It was a red band that made her think of the emissaries who'd come to this land.

She was just thinking *Couldn't be...* when, distracted by her thoughts, she bumped into someone.

"Hey, what do you think you're doin'?!" Her antagonist was a child, much smaller than her. An *obnoxious* child, probably just on the cusp of his teens, to judge by his attitude. "What did you think was gonna happen, standing there spaced out like that?"

Maomao was angry—who wouldn't be? If this had been the pleasure district, she would already have given him a good knock on the head, but

somehow she managed to restrain herself. She was going to be the adult here. Interestingly, though, the little shit received a knock on the head anyway, without Maomao's having to do anything.

"Ow!" the kid yelped.

"It's *your* fault for not watching where you were going," Shisui informed him.

"Sis!"

So the little shit knew her! In an instant, he'd forgotten all about the bop on the noggin, running circles around her like an excited puppy.

"Hey, and that's Suirei! What's with that outfit? It looks way hot on you!"

"Shut up," Suirei snapped, but the little shit acted as if he hadn't heard her.

"Granny said I wasn't gonna see you two anymore, but I guess she was just pulling my leg. I shoulda known!"

The little shit might have a bad attitude, but he looked like he came from a good family: he was wearing decent clothes, and his hair was done properly. A couple of missing front teeth made him look a little ridiculous, though.

"Ooh, I know! Is this about the festival? That's why you came home, isn't it? The festival starts tomorrow!"

"You're right—our timing was perfect," Shisui said, looking around the village with that innocent smile of hers. Now that they mentioned it, Maomao realized that paper streamers and celebratory paper lanterns hung from the eaves of the buildings all around them, and other than the people in light robes, obviously guests of the baths, everyone seemed to be busy getting ready for something.

"Do you have your lantern yet?" the little shit asked.

"We only just got back. Any good ones left?" Shisui said.

"You just follow me," he replied, and led her by the hand further into the village, leaving Maomao to trail after them. He brought them to a building that was incongruously beautiful among the plain constructs of the rest of the village. Maomao thought it might belong to the village chief, but apparently it was an inn, as an elaborate signboard outside proclaimed. The reason the place was made to look so impressive, Maomao guessed, must have been because it served as a bathhouse for important visitors.

This was evidently where Suirei had meant to bring them anyway, for she greeted the master of the house, who answered politely, indeed cringingly.

So maybe that really was one of the emissaries. Just outside the inn, Maomao saw a palanquin of unusual construction, and thought she recognized one of the men tending to it. He'd been one of the emissaries' guards. *But what would she be doing here?*

"You're wondering what that emissary is doing here, aren't you?" Suirei said as she collected a key from the innkeeper and came back to them.

Maomao looked at her, fighting a shiver of surprise. "Funny you should even know about that," she said, choosing a sarcastic swipe over a simple "Yes."

"Just because I was dead doesn't mean I didn't have work to do," Suirei replied. Was that a joke? Most unusual for her. Suirei seemed somehow different from the callous woman Maomao had known before. Perhaps dying had changed her. She was still pondering it as they entered the inn.

She was led to a room so sumptuous that one wondered how it had found its way out into the middle of the woods like this. It was divided into three areas: two bedrooms and a living space. One of the bedrooms contained one bed, the other, two. The one in the single-bed room was canopied—which seemed to imply that that room was for the master, the other for the servants.

Shisui headed for the little shit's room. "Coming, Maomao?"

In point of fact, Maomao would have liked nothing better than to throw herself down on one of the beds and stay there, but she didn't think she could exactly turn down this request. Suirei apparently had something else to deal with, but naturally she didn't want to leave Maomao alone.

When they emerged into the courtyard, they found the little shit ordering around a group of maids, evidently preparing for something.

"Will this be enough, Young Master?"

"Hmmm... Yeah, I guess so."

Maomao looked over and saw a panoply of masks and bundles of flowering plants. The masks were all in the shape of fox faces, and while some were larger and some smaller, they were all pure white. The grasses included pampas, ears of rice, and buckwheat, along with lantern plant, which wasn't in season. This last was long since withered, yet it hadn't lost its color; it remained vivid. Shisui smiled and picked it up. The little shit gave a shy chuckle and rubbed the spot under his nose.

"I know you love that, Sis," he said. "I worked hard to find one."

Yeah, right. You mean the women did. Maomao peered at a white fox mask. It was carved from wood, the surface carefully polished. There was a brush and pigments nearby; it seemed you were supposed to paint the mask however you liked.

Shisui said, “Thank you, I do. But you weren’t the one who found it, were you, Kyou-u?” She’d taken the words right out of Maomao’s mouth. The little shit named Kyou-u, looking even more embarrassed, turned toward the maids and mumbled, “Thank you.”

Hoh. So he had a halfway decent side after all. Maomao thought she might promote him from “little shit” to just “brat.”

“Very nice.” Shisui grabbed the kid and rubbed his head vigorously.

“Ow! Ow! Sis, that hurts!” The kid didn’t sound all that upset, though—maybe because he was crammed up against Shisui’s chest. He might have been a kid, but he was also, most definitely, a male of the species.

Maomao turned away from the playful scene and began painting one of the fox masks.

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Chapter 12: Lantern Plant

When they came to the rear palace that day, the very air felt different.

Jinshi headed for the Jade Pavilion, Gaoshun and several other eunuchs with him. Consort Gyokuyou had looked out of sorts for the past several days, and this morning he'd received word that she seemed likely to give birth any time.

Maomao's adoptive father, the man called Luomen, had been in constant attendance on the consort, but the baby wouldn't come. There remained the question of whether it would be a breech birth—the whole reason Luomen had been summoned from the pleasure district in the first place.

No one had officially mentioned the fact that the consort would be giving birth, but the tension in the air at the Jade Pavilion suggested everyone knew. Other palace ladies tried to get a glimpse into the residence from outside. The moment they realized Jinshi was there, though, they turned red and scuttled back to work.

It was now ten days since Maomao had vanished.

Jinshi was greeted by Hongniang, who looked somewhat worn out as she ushered them into the pavilion. In the hallway was a large washbasin and a teapot heating over a brazier, ready for the moment the child was born. They'd obviously prepared in case the delivery went quickly.

"How is she?" Jinshi asked, forcing himself to sound calm and collected. The ladies-in-waiting looked at him uneasily, but it was the elderly man emerging from the room who gave him the details.

"The contractions have stopped for the moment. I can't tell yet when the child might be born." It could, in principle, happen any time, although it would still be somewhat early at this point.

"And *how is the mother*?"

"The consort is still alert and calm. At the moment, I don't think there's any danger of a breech birth."

So Maomao's treatments had helped. That was a relief, but they weren't out of the woods yet. There were still too many variables.

There was another man in the hallway with them; he was dressed in a doctor's outfit and had a thin mustache. He was the rear palace's official physician, but at that moment he was little more than an obstacle, and the ladies-in-waiting seemed to resent having him there. At his feet was a cat—too old to be called a kitten anymore, Maomao was now a proper young feline. Jinshi couldn't help wondering whether that was sanitary, but the cat helped distract Princess Lingli, who was otherwise desperate to go to her mother, so perhaps it was a net good.

Normally the rear palace, quite frankly, could have gotten along without its doctor, but at this moment Jinshi was glad to have him there. The man's expression was easy to read, and at the moment he was clearly suffering from a felt need to be of service, and distress that Maomao was still missing. The combination seemed so likely to produce simple mistakes that the ladies-in-waiting of the Jade Pavilion had evidently ordered him to stand in one place and not move. Seeing someone so obviously even more distraught than he was actually helped calm Jinshi down, allowing him to set aside his mounting panic.

"Very well," Jinshi said. "I'll take my leave for the moment, then. If *anything* happens, send a messenger."

"Yes, sir," the grandmotherly eunuch said with a bow.

Gaoshun appeared at almost the same moment Luomen withdrew. "Master Jinshi," he said. Jinshi had sent him to see the Matron of the Serving Women about a separate matter.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Ahem..." Gaoshun glanced around, effectively communicating that this discussion should be held privately. The delivery might resume at any moment, but Jinshi could hardly stand there indefinitely, so he left two eunuchs and then saw himself out of the Jade Pavilion.

"All right. What is it?"

"It's about the vanished eunuch. I asked the other eunuchs if they knew something, anything, about the matter."

The missing eunuch had gone by the name Tian, meaning *Heaven*. A common name; one might hear it anywhere. Reports were that Tian hadn't been very close to the other eunuchs. He was gorgeous to look at and was frequently mobbed by palace women, but it seemed there had been another side to him. Of all the eunuchs freed from slavery to the barbarians, he alone

had no other personal acquaintances in the group. In other words, it was possible he'd insinuated himself among them before they arrived at the rear palace.

The safest bet was that this had been his plan all along. It explained why Tian had gone out of his way not to get close to anyone—and it meant they were wasting time, without even any information to show for it.

"One eunuch did say he'd seen someone he thought was Tian praying in front of a shrine."

"I daresay that's hardly uncommon." The rear palace had no shortage of shrines big and small. A prayer now and then was the least one would expect from a devout believer.

"Yes, but..." From the folds of his robe Gaoshun produced a diagram of the rear palace; he pointed to a shrine in the northern quarter.

"That's..." Jinshi began. It was a shrine dedicated to the veneration of those who had died in the rear palace, the same place they'd performed Consort Jin's funeral. Typically, those who died here were returned to their families—but there were those who had nowhere to go even after death.

Jinshi immediately turned toward the northern quarter.

"The man I spoke to said Tian was visiting a grave."

"Whose?"

"I'm afraid he wasn't sure."

Jinshi grunted and crossed his arms. He decided to go and inspect the place himself. He had other things to do, but he just couldn't let this go.

There was an abiding horror of death in the rear palace. This was where the future sons of heaven were to be born and raised—of course the inhabitants would wish to distance themselves from anything as inauspicious as death.

At the same time, though, those who served the privileged had a custom: those who had lain with the Emperor once could never leave the rear palace as long as they lived. There were exceptions, of course. Consorts given to underlings for political reasons, or as a reward for loyal service. Mostly, though, such women were the daughters of powerful people. A mere maid whose blossom withered on the branch, who never produced any offspring, could expect to simply fade away here in this garden, her name recorded and remembered nowhere.

The place Jinshi was now going was where those flowers slept.

There weren't even ten grave markers there—though he didn't know whether that was many or few—and all of them belonged to women who had served in the palace during the time of the previous emperor. The overseers of the rear palace had decided (call it capricious if you must) that too many interments would soon become a problem.

When they arrived, they discovered someone was already there. Most unusual for anyone to visit the graves of nameless palace women. Even from a distance, they could see that the visitor was an older woman; she was sitting in front of the nearest, comparatively newer grave marker.

This woman, perhaps more than forty years old, had a face that conveyed strength. Before the grave were flowers she must have picked somewhere, and a branch of a lantern plant—Jinshi would have said it was slightly out of season. Maybe someone else had left it there earlier.

The woman stood up—and that was when she noticed Jinshi and Gaoshun. Her eyes went wide for just a second, but then they returned to normal and she bowed politely before moving to make her exit. There was nothing inherently wrong with visiting the graves; they had no reason to suspect her of anything.

Except for one thing.

As the woman walked by, Jinshi caught a strong whiff of alcohol. *Very* strong—as if he might get drunk just smelling it. Like those foreign distilled spirits. Almost before he knew what he was doing, he had grabbed her wrist.

She couldn't conceal her shock. Nonetheless, she managed to act calm as she said, "Can I help you, sir?"

Normally, Jinshi would never have done something so impulsive. He would have considered his actions more carefully, rather than suddenly grab a palace woman's arm. But even though he'd convinced himself that he was perfectly calm, he now saw that he had been far more out of sorts than he had realized.

"Where is Maomao?" he asked. He felt the woman tense. Gaoshun and the other eunuchs watched them silently. *Calm down*, Jinshi told himself. He had to calm down. When he spoke again, it was with his customary honeyed tone. "I'm curious to find out about a certain befreckled palace woman. Would you happen to know anything about her?"

He used the smile that so often got him what he wanted from the palace

women—but this woman didn't smile back; instead, the blood drained from her face. She looked like she'd seen a goblin. The woman, Shenlü's, pupils dilated; Jinshi could feel her pulse racing where he held her wrist. She knew something. He was sure of it. He gripped her arm tighter so she couldn't get away.

The woman looked at him, eyes wide. Perhaps she had foreign blood in her veins, for her eyes were green. Suddenly, though she gazed at him, her look turned distant. "An old memory's come back to me," she said. "Someone calls to me with a kind voice, gives me sweet candies from a foreign land."

Huge tears began to roll down her cheeks, but Jinshi couldn't follow what she was saying.

"No one seems to remember what he looked like when he was young. All I've heard is that by the time he was old, he was but a shadow of his former self. He ceased to come to me after I was fourteen, so I know nothing of what he looked like after that time."

Who was the woman talking about? What was she saying, and why? Jinshi could see, though, that even deeper than the green hue in the woman's eyes was the anger.

"But he, too, had a voice like honey and a face like a celestial nymph's." There was conviction in her voice. "Why would one such as yourself stoop to pretending to be a eunuch?"

Jinshi's grip slackened, just for an instant, but it was all Shenlü needed; she shook him off and began to run. She'd never had any hope of escape, though; with the eunuchs all around, she was soon apprehended.

"What shall we do with her, Master Jinshi?" asked the man who had captured her. Even as he spoke, the woman produced a small bottle from the folds of her robe, uncorked the stopper, and drank the contents. Gaoshun was yelling even before Jinshi: "Make her vomit that out!" He ordered one of the eunuchs to bring water, holding on to the collapsed woman himself and jamming his fingers into her mouth, trying to make her throw up. Jinshi could only watch.

"—shi! Master Jinshi!" He was momentarily startled by Gaoshun's shouting. He must have been completely out of it. The eunuch was already back with the water and was pouring it down the woman's throat. The bottle she'd drunk from was rolling on the ground. Jinshi recognized it as one of the

vessels into which Maomao had put her distilled alcohol. Extremely strong alcohol was a poison in its own right, and this woman had just drunk an entire bottle of it.

The wind gusted, blowing away the flowers in front of the grave and shaking the lantern plant berries.

“Master Jinshi, what do you want us to do?” Gaoshun asked forcefully. Jinshi suddenly realized the other man’s creased brow was practically in front of his eyes. “Master Jinshi, you need to get a hold of yourself; surely you know that. You need not be troubled by a palace woman’s little joke.”

“Joke?” Jinshi asked. Who would drink a vial of poison as a joke? Hadn’t this all started because Jinshi had impulsively grabbed her arm? And had the person the woman had spoken of truly been...

“Gaoshun... Do I indeed resemble him?”

The thought had always bothered Jinshi, ever since he’d been young. He didn’t resemble that person. Nor his older brother, nor his mother. So who, then, did he resemble? It was a question that fed baseless rumors among the ladies-in-waiting. Stories that he was illegitimate.

It was practically laughable: what was he doing here, in this garden of women? He’d asked his elder brother to let him take on this eunuch identity in order to cast aside his status as heir apparent... It was ridiculous, plain and simple.

Still frustrated with himself, he went and stood by the grave marker Shenlü had been visiting. He wanted to laugh himself to pieces, but he still had work to do. Slowly, he knelt by the marker and picked up the red pod of the lantern plant where it had fallen. Dried out now that its season was over, it had begun to tear, revealing the red fruit inside. He remembered hearing that lantern plant could help induce an abortion. And when he saw the name carved into the gravestone—a name that would one day be effaced by the passage of time—he thought he understood why someone would have offered the plant here.

Taihou.

A perfectly ordinary name for a serving woman. Not so much in the capital, not these days; but in the countryside, women were calling their daughters Taihou in droves. Here, though, on this grave marker, the name was unforgettable.

It was the name of a serving woman who had died last year. A woman

whose only joy in the cloistered world of the rear palace had been getting groups of women together to tell scary stories. She'd had no family at all. With one exception. If the daughter who'd been born from her assignation with the palace doctor had lived...

Taihou. The missing eunuch and serving woman. And...

No. He still didn't have all the pieces of this puzzle. But his intuition enabled him to fill in the gaps, and slowly intuition became certainty. Jinshi knew where he had to go next.

If a child born at that time had survived, they would now be two years older than the Emperor. Suppose the banished doctor had taken the child with him. They were said to have disappeared after that, but that was questionable. Something about it didn't fit.

The woman named Taihou had been a servant to one of the consorts—none other than Loulan's mother, Shishou's wife. Taihou was said to have been some relation of the Shi clan's, a distant relative of Loulan's mother. Perhaps *she* would know something about the child born to this serving woman and the vanished doctor, then, Jinshi thought, and turned toward the Garnet Pavilion.

There was no hint there of the austerity that had pervaded the pavilion until the previous year. Instead the place overflowed with ostentatious exoticism. Jinshi sighed privately, then made himself put on his usual smile. A lady-in-waiting bowed to him, almost shyly, and led him inside.

They passed through a hallway lined with garish mother-of-pearl baubles, then came to the receiving room in which he was normally seen. The mistress of the pavilion was lounging on her couch, also as usual, polishing her nails.

Jinshi allowed his eyes to crinkle in a smile. Consort Loulan was attended by six ladies-in-waiting, all assiduously seeking to her every need. Each was dressed in a flamboyant outfit; today's theme seemed to be traditional clothing of the island nation to the east. Each of the women wore a panoply of layered robes, a garish sight if ever there was one. The women were so thoroughly covered that one couldn't even see the shapes of their bodies, and at the same time they'd applied makeup around their eyes that made them appear wide-eyed and angry, giving their faces an angular look. The overall effect was odd at best. Jinshi thought it made them look like smirking foxes.

He found himself wondering what compelled Loulan and her ladies to

dress in such outrageous ways. Was she aware that the Emperor found it off-putting? Loulan, Jinshi knew, understood her place as a high consort very well—and her place as Shishou's daughter even better.

Loulan whispered something to one of her ladies-in-waiting, holding up a folding fan made of feathers to hide her mouth. A most refined way of speaking to each other, Jinshi mused—but that couldn't be all it was. He had come here grasping at the faintest of hopes, and it gave him an appreciation for fine details that might otherwise have escaped his notice. The mole on Loulan's temple, for example. She'd tried to hide it with makeup, but it was still faintly visible. Maybe sweat had diluted the white powder somewhat.

If Jinshi remembered correctly, however, Loulan didn't have a mole on her temple.

He didn't bother to sit in the chair the lady-in-waiting offered him. Instead, he strode straight toward Consort Loulan.

"Whatever is the matter?" one of the ladies asked, looking incensed. "Surely even you, Master Jinshi, must observe *some* decorum." What was the woman's name again? Jinshi prided himself on knowing how many women worked in each of the pavilions, their names and where they came from. The ladies of the Garnet Pavilion, though, were constantly changing their clothes and makeup, and all had similar builds. Thus he knew their names but could never seem to put them to their faces. Instead, he distinguished them by subtle details—who had a mole, or whose eyes were a certain shape.

Jinshi reached out, grasped Loulan's fan between his fingers, and flung it away.

"W—Well, I never!" one of the ladies-in-waiting cried. Consort Loulan turned away from Jinshi as if afraid of him, and her ladies moved to put themselves between him and her. A consummate show of loyalty to their mistress—or so it seemed.

Jinshi had only to glance at the eunuchs who had accompanied him and they pulled the women aside, clearing his path to Loulan. He took her shoulder, none too gently, and forced her to face him. Even under her copious makeup, he could see her flushing red.

"I seem to recall Consort Loulan having *seven* ladies-in-waiting," he said. As Shishou's coddled daughter, she'd had no fewer than fifty servants with her when she entered the rear palace. Jinshi held Loulan in place and wiped away the makeup around her eyes with his fingers, revealing large, double-

fold eyes. Now, what had been the name of the woman with the mole on her temple?

"I believe your name was...Sourin. Or—no, Renpu, was that it?" Jinshi smiled, very deliberately not allowing any anger into his face. The lady-in-waiting who had transformed herself into Consort Loulan, however, went from flushed to deathly pale, and began to tremble.

"Mas—" One of the other ladies-in-waiting moved once more to get between them, but Jinshi simply looked at her, and she winced visibly and stepped back again.

"Where is the real Consort Loulan?"

Had she planned all this from the beginning? The army of servants, the ladies-in-waiting who physically resembled her, and the ever-changing, dazzling costumes—all so no one would notice if the consort changed places with one of her women. Had that been her goal all along? And where was the real Loulan now?

"Where did she go?" Jinshi asked. The woman posing as Loulan shivered violently but didn't say a word. Jinshi tightened his grip. "*Where did she go?*"

When he asked the question this third time, the woman who had tried to interpose herself leaned in, hugging the fake consort protectively. She gave Jinshi a look. "I'm very sorry, sir. But I swear, she truly doesn't know." He hadn't noticed before because of the matching outfits, but this woman was several years older than the fake consort. "Please, have mercy." The woman, deeply distressed, looked at the fake consort's feet. The long hem of the skirt was damp, and droplets could be seen running down the silent woman's legs and dripping off her toes. So the fake Loulan was terrified enough to lose control of her bladder.

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Jinshi released the fake Loulan's chin. Her eyes widened; the pupils were dilated, her breathing was harsh, and she was still shaking. The pale skin of her chin and neck showed clear signs of where Jinshi had grabbed her.

It was a display of violence all but unthinkable for the eunuch Jinshi. Far too unrefined, too uncivilized for him.

Admitting the daughters of powerful officials to the rear palace had its advantages for the Emperor. Yes, the officials could look forward to potentially having a grandchild sit on the throne should their daughter bear the sovereign's offspring—but it could tie their hands as well. For many parents—not all, but many—their daughter is the apple of their eye. The birdcage that was the rear palace effectively held those precious girls hostage.

Considering how Shishou had pushed to get Loulan into the rear palace, he clearly doted on her. His daughter became a high consort, but while the Emperor was obliged to treat her with a certain level of respect, she was likewise expected to conduct herself to certain standards.

Already, Jinshi had stopped thinking of her as "Consort" Loulan. For she had violated those standards.

"She said she wasn't coming back," the lady-in-waiting from earlier said solemnly. The woman, who said she was Loulan's chief lady-in-waiting, submitted herself to Jinshi's questioning in place of the false consort, who could barely breathe properly, let alone hold a conversation. From what Jinshi gathered, she had been pushed into acting as Loulan's body double because she bore the closest physical resemblance to her; the woman didn't really understand the situation or the implications of what she was doing. She thought the demand to impersonate her mistress was just another of Loulan's whims.

Jinshi clenched one hand into a fist. He'd been wrong. He knew now that it had been the wrong way to approach the situation, not what the eunuch Jinshi with his delicate smile would do. But he hadn't been calm enough to think of any other way to approach the situation.

So she wasn't coming back. That presumably meant she'd fled the rear palace. That was a serious offense, punishable in some cases by death. And how much worse it was when the crime was committed by a high consort. It was like a courtesan cutting her ties with her house, the apothecary's daughter had said once. Jinshi smiled to himself; it was just like her to

compare the place where the Emperor's children were born to a common pleasure district.

The girl. Someone else they still hadn't found. Knowing Maomao, it was always possible she'd gone along voluntarily. But more likely, she'd been given no other option.

But why? He still had so many questions. He interrogated the chief lady-in-waiting thoroughly but was left shaking his head. He could always have her put to torture, but he didn't think it would get him anywhere. Her eyes had said she was telling the truth.

He had the ladies-in-waiting of the Garnet Pavilion, the maids, the eunuchs—anyone associated with Loulan—confined to a single location. The "classroom" was just about the right size. Meanwhile, eunuchs were doing the tedious work of checking every woman in the rear palace, just for good measure, but so far they hadn't found anyone who resembled Loulan.

Jinshi knew he was in no shape to deal with Consort Gyokuyou's delivery; much against his wishes, he charged Gaoshun with the job.

Jinshi was in his office, holding his head in his hands. Basen was with him, perhaps because it was a state of emergency—for at that moment he was reporting, "Not long ago, Master Lakan charged the rear palace, attempting to force his way in."

Jinshi's face was tight; he didn't think he could have smiled if he'd wanted to. It was an unbelievable thing to do, yet the man with the monocle had done it.

"Word must have gotten out somehow," Basen said, making a face like he was chewing on something bitter. "And Shishou's current whereabouts are still unknown." It was clear enough why Basen no longer referred to the man with any title of honor: his daughter Loulan had fled the rear palace, and as her father, he too would be treated as a traitor to the Emperor.

Meanwhile, they'd also received a report on Shenlü's status after drinking the alcohol. She'd survived, somehow, but hadn't yet regained consciousness. They were told she'd been a personal acquaintance of Taihou's, and that was no doubt how she'd been brought into this conspiracy against the throne. With the former emperor gone, her rage, Jinshi suspected, had turned against the rear palace generally. They didn't even know who else at the clinic might have been involved. Perhaps they'd simply gone along quietly because they,

like Shenlü, had been the former ruler's victims.

Jinshi didn't have time to twiddle his thumbs. He wanted to go flying from the rear palace and hunt down Loulan. But he simply didn't have enough information. To go running off now would be like going in search of a needle in a haystack. First, he thought, he should find out what Shishou was up to. Yes, well, he already had someone working on that. And that left Jinshi with nothing to do but pace back and forth in his office.

"Master Jinshi," Basen said with a glance in his direction. A visitor had arrived outside the office, and Basen seemed to be trying to remind him that it wouldn't do for him to be seen in such a pathetic state. Jinshi, bowing to necessity, sat and pretended he was calm. Basen glanced at a mirror that was positioned so as to conceal what was inside the room; then he awaited their visitor with a look of some perplexity.

In came a simple official, a person of a height that might have been called petite had he been a woman. He wore a pair of round spectacles, but other than somewhat unkempt hair and narrow, fox-like eyes, there was little obviously remarkable about the young man, although he looked oddly familiar.

The young man put his hands in his sleeves and bowed. Jinshi thought he spotted something tucked in the young man's sash; when he looked a little closer, he realized it was an abacus.

"A pleasure to meet you. My name is Kan Lahan." With that supremely simple self-introduction, the young man grinned.

That name: ah, so that was who he resembled.

No one would have known who he was had he identified himself as a member of the House of Kan, for in the whole country of Li, there were only about twenty family names. Thus, when indicating their families, people often used courtesy names, which were frequently passed down from generation to generation. Separate from such family courtesy names, there were also courtesy names given to various houses since ancient times by the Imperial family.

In the case of the man standing before them, La was his courtesy name. There were only two within the outer court who claimed that name: Lakan and the nephew he'd adopted. The only other person who might even be considered to count was a man who had come to the rear palace recently as a physician —Luomen, "Luo" being the same character as "La."

All of which raised the question, what was Lakan's adopted son doing here?

"Did you need something with me?" Jinshi outranked Lahan in the official hierarchy, such that the young man's sudden appearance might in itself be considered rude. However, Jinshi knew that pulling rank and making scary faces wouldn't get him anywhere in this case. And regardless of his station, there were some officials who simply treated him with less respect because he was a eunuch.

"I thought you might wish to see this, sir." Lahan produced a scroll from his sleeve and passed it to Basen. Basen inspected it, then handed it to Jinshi. Jinshi, for his part, decided to go ahead and take a look at it, trusting that a delivery from Lakan's son might well be significant. He undid the string tying the scroll shut and unrolled it—then looked at it in amazement.

"What do you think, sir, if I may ask?" Lahan was still grinning, a deeply self-satisfied and rather unpleasant expression, but the contents of the scroll fully justified his smugness. It was a list of words and numbers—but depending on how one looked at it, it was also something else.

"It's something my adoptive father recently instructed me to look into. I don't think he was at all happy not knowing where the feifa were coming from. Anyhow, I did some sniffing around in connection with the officials who were recently punished and discovered a most intriguing pattern."

The scroll was a record of receipts. The sort of thing someone associated with the board that oversaw the national treasury could easily get a look at. Even officials of other affiliations could see such things if they followed the proper procedures.

"I thought it would be simplest to show you a primary source. Granted, this is only a selection I made; there's a bit much of it to parse otherwise."

Excerpt or not, he'd arranged the numbers such that even a nonspecialist like Jinshi could understand them. And they revealed that over the past several years, the expenditures of one government organ in particular had grown larger and larger.

"Interesting, isn't it? These past several years, there's been neither drought nor any plague of insects, and yet the price of grain has risen steadily. Why do you suppose that is? I thought it most strange, so I examined the market price over the same period—and it seems the price of grain was the steadiest of just about any commodity."

He was clearly building to something. There was something else the price of which had risen month by month, along with the cost of grain.

“And there was something else: for some reason the price of iron has been creeping up as well. Here you can see the price of metals all over the country rising—they wouldn’t happen to be building a colossal statue somewhere, would they?”

Jinshi understood what Lahan was driving at. He set down the scroll and looked at the young man, who certainly shared his shrewdness with his adoptive father at least. The price of grain might not sound so important as such, but there was a great deal of it. A modest increase in price would mean a substantial rise in value. And what if, Lahan was suggesting, someone was keeping the difference for themselves?

As for the increase in the price of metal, that implied an increase in demand. That could be caused when, say, someone building a monument to display their power, or some other highly visible project, started gathering material from all over. Even stew pots and farm equipment might be requisitioned and melted down. But there were other reasons the price might go up...

“I’m capable of examining the circulation of currency over these past years more closely. Including where it seems to concentrate,” Lahan said. Exactly what Jinshi had been hoping to hear. It was almost as if this was precisely what he’d come here to say.

It seemed to Jinshi that there was a request in Lahan’s gaze. That, no doubt, was why he had brought this scroll to Jinshi: men like him never did anything unless it somehow served them.

“And what do you want in exchange?” Jinshi asked bluntly.

Lahan’s expression softened as if he’d simply been waiting for Jinshi to ask. He took a piece of paper from his sleeve, although he looked somewhat reluctant about it. “Perhaps you would be so kind as to consider this amount.”

The paper was a bill for the repair of a wall of the rear palace. Jinshi could only assume it was one Lakan had burst through.

Chapter 13: Festival

Maomao was given a traditional-looking outfit to wear: a pure-white jacket and a red skirt. She covered her face with her fox mask and carried a lantern decorated with pampas grass and rice stalks. Thus attired, she was told, they were going to walk to the shrine at the edge of town.

The men wore blue clothes, while the children had bundles of rice and pampas grass draped behind them like tails. These people appeared to worship Kosen, a fox deity. The fox was a spirit of abundance, venerated in many places. It was only natural that there should be a major festival in autumn, when so much came from the land.

Maomao heard the chiming of a bell. Beside her was someone who had outlined the eyes of their mask in a way that looked faintly ridiculous, despite its being a fox. The normal color to paint around the eyes of a mask like this was red, yet this person had used green, and the corners of the eyes seemed to droop down somehow.

"Looks more like a tanuki," Maomao commented to the mask's owner, Shisui. Maybe she was better at drawing bugs than beasts. The thought brought an unexpected smile to Maomao's face. *Guess this is hardly the time*, she said to herself. But she also knew that denying herself a pleasant thought wouldn't help her under the circumstances.

"You remind me of a cat, Maomao," Shisui said. There was a bell on her hair stick that jingled every time she laughed. It sounded oddly like the bugs she'd once collected. Just on the end of the hair stick, Maomao could see a small bug carved from a jewel. The girl really did like insects.

"Here, Maomao, make sure it's nice and tight," she said, and then snugged down the string of Maomao's mask. The string went right over where Maomao had tied her hair, though, and Shisui couldn't quite get it to stay. "Hrm. Hang on, I'll try again. Sit down." She helped Maomao seat herself on the railing of the inn. Then she brushed Maomao's hair aside and retied it.

"Hmm, it needs something else. It looks so lonely with just a hair tie."

“I don’t mind.”

“Oh, I know! I’ll lend you a hair stick. I have one shaped like a spider’s web. It’s really cute!”

Maomao wished there were some way to politely refuse. She dug into the folds of her robes and managed to come up with the hair stick Jinshi had given her. It looked plain, but the quality was fine. Maomao, who was perfectly happy to get by with a simple hair tie, tended to leave it in her robe.

“Use this, if you would.”

“Aww...” Maomao didn’t have to turn around to picture the pout on Shisui’s face. She pressed the hair stick into the other girl’s palm. “Gee, this is nice, Maomao,” Shisui commented.

“Someone gave it to me,” she replied. Given it to her without much ceremony, true enough, still.

“What if I asked you to give it to *me*? Would you do it?”

After a moment’s pause, Maomao said carefully, “I’m afraid not.” She’d considered simply handing it off to someone once before, but hadn’t. If she had then—or did now—she could barely imagine what the eunuch-impersonator would say. Whatever it was, she knew he would be angry.

You’d think I’d just need to keep my mouth shut.

But Jinshi was oddly skilled at reading Maomao’s expressions. Partly because they’d now known each other for a fair amount of time, true, but even by that standard he was quite sensitive to slight changes in her face. Even though Maomao, for one, felt she wasn’t very deft at controlling her facial muscles, and thought all of her looks manifested as little more than scowls.

Then again, maybe she could give Shisui the hair stick; if she never made it back to the capital alive, she wouldn’t have to worry about the consequences.

“There, all done.” Shisui patted Maomao’s shoulder and she stood up. Her hair was now tucked behind her right ear, making the mask much easier to put on. When she looked out at the village through the small eyeholes, the whole world seemed different. Maybe it was because it was night, or perhaps it was the wavering flames of the torches, but the people walking around in their masks really did look like foxes.

Except for the one standing next to her, who still looked like a green-eyed tanuki.

Shisui, however, wasn't the only one who had painted her mask in green; once in a while they crossed paths with a green-eyed fox. Most of them were men; their blue trousers gave them away. Maomao started to wonder if the green eyes had some sort of significance.

"It's otherworldly, isn't it?" Shisui said.

"Uh-huh." That much was certainly true.

"You're not freaked out?"

"The point of which would be?"

She agreed, though, that it was unearthly. Instead of her normal shoes, she was wearing wooden clogs that clacked with each step she took; and then there was the bell ringing, and an owl that hooted from the forest. All the noises came together into something uncanny, until she was almost convinced she could hear foxes yowling in the night.

With the foxes' voices in the background, they walked among the lantern plants and the rice stalks and the firelight. They emerged from the forest and made their way along a single narrow path winding among the rice paddies. Their progress was accompanied by an occasional unpleasant hissing, the sound of insects incinerating themselves as they flew into the torches placed at intervals along the path. There seemed to be quite a few of them.

"Lots of grasshoppers this year," Shisui said. That was exactly why the festival had to be so lavish. That was the wish it carried. "Around here, we venerate a fox deity who brings abundance. You know why?"

"No, why?"

Riiing, riiing. Shisui's bell chimed as she walked and talked. "There was once a tribe of native peoples who lived in this area."

Then, though, a people from a different country came from the west. The locals didn't simply accept them immediately, of course. No one would be so naive. Most villages chased them out, wanted them to go away. But a few villages, a very small number, took those newcomers in.

"These people from the west, they knew things—and some people here saw the value of that knowledge."

The newcomers knew how to make fields more productive, how to exterminate harmful insects. Valuable knowledge indeed. Many, however, still didn't smile on them. Around the time the newcomers had settled down and begun to have children with the locals, their neighbors attacked, seeking to steal their fields.

After several such attacks, the people built a hidden village, so that their children and grandchildren would be safe. They found a place where hot springs bubbled forth from the earth, and there they built. Presumably, what they constructed was the village where Maomao now was. And the foxes? They represented the people from that foreign land, she thought. Referring to those of other tribes as if they were animals was hardly uncommon.

In other words, the deity—or perhaps deities—of this village was the very ancestor of these people, and the villagers were themselves fox-gods.

"They say the foxes here are white foxes. So that mask was pure white when you picked it up, right? But by settling here, they became dyed with color."

White foxes. Did that symbolize pale skin? And could the dyeing be taken to refer to intermarriage?

I feel like I've heard something like that before, Maomao thought, and at almost the same moment Shisui provided the answer.

"The men of this village, a lot of them can't tell colors apart," she said.

"Can't tell colors apart?"

"Yeah. It's a lot less common among the women, though."

Well, that explains it. That was why there were so many masks with green eyes. And why so many of them were worn by men. And even why one of them belonged to Shisui.

Shisui took the pod from the lantern plant attached to her lantern and broke the orange skin, taking out the berries within. She wiped them briskly against her sleeve and popped them into her mouth.

"They don't taste very good," Maomao informed her.

"I know."

"They're toxic."

"I know."

Prostitutes used lantern plant berries as an ingredient in their abortifacients. The berries wouldn't kill you, but they weren't exactly pleasant to eat.

Among those who had fled here from the west, some must have gone to the area of the current capital and become the ancestors of today's Emperor, while those who put down roots in the north had founded this village.

Their wooden clogs tapped along the ground. The light of the lanterns was lovely, and at the same time eerie, making Maomao feel as if, were they to

continue to walk down this path, it might lead them to some other world.

The closer they got to the shrine, though, the more ordinary things felt. Street stalls began to appear, and the aroma of meat on skewers perfumed the air. There was the smell of some sweet candy, as well. The shopkeepers wore fox masks like everyone else, but presumably they didn't accept leaves as currency, as foxes were said to do.

Shisui abruptly stopped, raised her mask, worked her jaws a few times, and then spat the skins of the lantern-plant berries into the grass.

"Disgusting," Maomao remarked.

"Hah, sorry!" Shisui trotted toward one of the street stalls. "How about something to eat?"

"You're buying." Maomao followed her to a stall selling skewers of meat; she started to drool when she saw the chicken dripping with grease. The offerings, however, also included frog and locust. Maomao regarded them silently.

"The locusts are plump and delicious this time of year," Shisui explained, and without a trace of hesitation she munched one of the bugs right off the skewer.

"I think I'll stick to chicken." Sure, Maomao *could* eat locusts. But why not have chicken if there was a choice?

"Not frog?" Shisui asked.

"I don't want to eat any frogs for a while..."

"What's with the glassy look in your eyes, Maomao?" Apparently it was obvious even behind her mask. In any event, Shisui said, "Got it," and took a chicken skewer from the man running the shop, then handed it to Maomao. Maomao pulled up her mask and dug in. It could have used some salt, but maybe that was too luxurious to hope for. Instead, the meat had been rubbed with herbs.

"Hm?"

"What is it?" Maomao asked. Shisui was frowning. Then she turned toward the grass and spat something out again. "I told you, that's gross," Maomao said, thinking that Shisui had some surprisingly rough edges. She appeared to have spat out the locust she'd just bought.

"That sucks. That place mixes grasshoppers in with their locusts. What a rip-off."

"Uh... They all look the same to me."

“Well, they’re not. It’s hard to tell with the wings and legs pulled off, but they taste nothing alike.” Shisui was munching on another insect to get the flavor out of her mouth. This one must have tasted better, for she was chewing thoughtfully.

Maomao sometimes ate snakes and frogs, but rarely bugs. In farming villages, eating insects often doubled as a way of keeping harmful pests away from the crops, but the pleasure district was more urban. Locusts were not a very popular dish, considering how many more flavorful and delicious things there were to eat. Sometimes, though, in years when the swarms were especially bad, farmers struggling to make a living would show up selling locusts in town.

The shrine sat on high ground, with a stone staircase leading up to it. That allowed it to look down on everything around it, including the land past the forest. The trees gave way to open plains, beyond which stood a mountain range.

Another town? Maomao thought. The range glittered with light—and not starlight.

“Maomao, over there,” Shisui said, bringing her back with a tug on her hand. There was a line, and when people reached the front of it, they left their masks at the shrine. A human figure could be seen within the shrine’s vermillion interior: a child, wearing a white mask and white clothing and sitting utterly still. Their face was hidden, but the mask looked familiar. It belonged to that brat, Kyou-u. He looked like trouble, yet his brushwork was delicate and his mask beautiful.

“Each year, children are chosen to sit there in lieu of the god,” Shisui explained.

“I’m impressed he can manage.”

“Hee hee. Everyone wants to do it. It is tiring, though—so they switch with someone else in shifts, before their legs go numb. I wonder if it’s a pleasant memory for them.” For some reason, Shisui’s eyes had a distant look. Then she said, “Looks like he’s almost done. Let’s go wait for him.” She led them around the back of the shrine.

There they found three more children, chatting, presumably waiting their turns.

“What’s going on?” Shisui asked, inserting herself in the circle of kids.

“Look at this,” one of the youngsters said, displaying his rice-stalk tail.

On close inspection, one could see that the fruit was in fact still unripe. “I got a bad one.”

“That’s because you didn’t look carefully when you chose,” Shisui said, exasperated. “Some people are stingy, you know.”

That is to say, feeling that it was a waste to offer a good, full ear of rice for the festival, they would give one that was poorly developed instead. Maomao looked at the stalk of rice. It had leaves, sure enough, but the ear was hollow—empty. It looked immature; not like it had never fruited, but rather as if it simply hadn’t had time.

“I got it from the village chief,” the kid said.

“Well, there’s your problem,” one of the other children responded with a shake of the head. “A part of the chief’s crop always comes in late. And because he’s such a tightwad, those are the only parts he ever donates for the festival.”

“What? Bah. The fox’ll curse him for that.”

“All the kids around here know about it,” one of them told him. “You don’t because you just came to the village last year. Live and learn!”

The boy’s shoulders slumped. Maomao looked at the ear of rice she was holding. The fruit was full and ripe. She detached it from her lantern and gave it to the boy.

“You sure?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said. She wasn’t exactly deeply religious; it didn’t matter to her how nice an ear of rice she had.

The boy, meanwhile, bowed to her, his eyes sparkling.

“How’d I do, Sis?” Kyou-u asked the moment he saw Shisui after coming out of the shrine. Another child, holding a fresh ear of rice and glowing, took his place.

“Very nice, very nice.”

“Hee hee!”

Maomao didn’t know what was so nice about it—he’d just sat in one place in the shrine—but she kept her peace.

“I wish my mom could’ve seen me,” Kyou-u said, somewhat sadly.

Shisui patted him on the head. “I know. Go make your offering, and then let’s go see the fire, okay?” She pointed to a watchtower beyond the shrine, down the opposite direction of the stairway they’d come up. But it was in a

very strange place.

"Is that...a spring?" Maomao asked.

"Maybe more of a pond," Shisui said.

The watchtower stood upon a body of water; it seemed to be mounted on a raft.

Kyou-u quickly came back from offering his mask and they headed down the second set of stairs. Plenty of other people who had offered their masks were already there. Straw was packed around the base of the watchtower, and when she looked hard, Maomao could see what seemed to be white masks by the light of the lanterns.

"After the masks have served as an offering for a whole year, we burn them along with the watchtower. It's said that once the masks have been consumed by the flames, the wishes written on them are carried up to heaven, and whatever you wished for will come true," Shisui said.

"I didn't write anything," Maomao said.

"Do you even believe in a superstition like that, Maomao?"

It was a good question, Maomao thought as she gazed at the watchtower. Instead of wishing fervently, it would be faster to simply fix your eyes on your goal and get moving.

"It's not a superstition!" Kyou-u protested. "The wishes *do* come true. I made real sure to paint my mask nice and write my wish real neat, just like last year. It *has* to come true." He was getting excited. Had he wished for something so important to him?

"What'd you wish for?" Maomao asked.

"You can't *tell*, dummy!"

"Okay. Fine." She'd just asked to be polite; she didn't actually care. Kyou-u, though, seemed bothered that she'd dropped the subject so readily. He kept glancing furtively at her.

"Look, here comes the flame," Shisui said, pointing at a young child holding a torch. A "tail" of rice bobbed behind him; he appeared to be the child with whom Maomao had traded rice stalks.

"You didn't want that role, Kyou-u?" Shisui asked.

"Hmph. I decided to let someone else handle it. I'm not a kid." Despite his protestations, there was a hint of envy in his eyes.

An adult wearing a mask accepted the torch from the child, put the flame to an arrow, and passed the arrow to another adult standing nearby with a

bow. The second person drew back the bowstring audibly, then let the burning arrow fly in a lazy arc until it dropped down precipitously—directly at the base of the watchtower. A peerless shot.

The watchtower must have been soaked in oil, because it caught with a *whoosh* and the flames spread quickly. They could hear the wood crackling.

"It's so weird," Shisui said. "How the watchtower burns, but the raft right under it doesn't."

That was probably because the raft was in contact with the water, keeping it cool enough to prevent it from burning. In any event, the watchtower turned into a pillar of flame, taking with it the fox masks around it. The smoke, then, must carry the wishes to the sky.

"Oh..." Kyou-u mumbled. The tower was collapsing, and some of the masks dropped into the water; he looked at them intently, trying to see whether his own mask was among them. But there was no way to tell from this distance. Not even half the masks were completely consumed by the fire and taken up to the heavens.

"The wishes that don't come true sink down to the bottom and nourish future blessings," Shisui said, almost to herself. "Insects don't survive the winter; all they leave behind are their children." She was focused on the distant spectacle of the conflagration of the watchtower.

Maomao didn't understand the meaning of her words. Not then.

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Chapter 14: The Worksite

When they got back to the inn, Suirei was waiting for them. She'd left in the middle of the day to go somewhere, and they hadn't seen her since then. Now she was sitting at a table with several books on it, reading. When she noticed Maomao and the others, she closed her book gently, the lamplight flickering with the breath of air.

"Dinner?" she asked.

"We'll eat, if there's anything," Shisui replied, and Suirei took a basket from the shelf. Inside was fried *youtiao* bread. She poured out two glasses of soy milk; the fact that she put one of them in front of Maomao seemed to mean it was acceptable for her to eat. Maomao took a piece of the cold, slightly hard bread and dipped it in the milk before eating it. The soy milk was sweet; it seemed to have a luxurious touch of honey in it.

Soy milk was a simple byproduct of the production of tofu, but the unpleasant smell meant most people didn't like it very much. The aroma of this milk, however, had been attenuated by the addition of fresh ginger, and it was quite drinkable.

The three women sat around the round table as if at three points of a triangle, Maomao eating silently, Shisui relating the events of the festival. Suirei gazed impassively at her book. For a moment, Maomao thought it looked like the book might be about medicine, and she took a keen interest in it—but it turned out to be an encyclopedia of insects. It wasn't a printed volume, and it bristled with handwritten comments, so many that it looked more like a notebook than a proper book.

Maomao stared hard at Suirei.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing. Just thinking it was about time I held you to your end of our bargain."

"You mean about the resurrection drug?" Ah, it was always nice to work with someone who was quick on the uptake. "Do you understand the position you're in?" Suirei demanded. Maomao was, in effect, a hostage, although she

was treated awfully well for all that. Reasonable enough: if she tried to run, they would almost certainly catch her more or less immediately. And if she were to somehow escape, there were no towns or villages nearby where she could go for help. And she didn't know how to ride a horse, at least not quickly. Even so, she would have expected to at least be confined somewhere, or maybe tied up. The way the two women were acting didn't seem to make any sense. If she asked them what they were after, they might actually tell her—but she had more important things on her mind at the moment.

"Is it thornapple and blowfish? And what's the ratio? What else do you add? How much do you need?"

Suirei didn't answer immediately.

"Tell me about what it's like right after you revive. I assume you're not able to move immediately." Without realizing what she was doing, Maomao had slid closer to Suirei, provoking a scowl from the other woman. Her hand was twitching. It hadn't done that before.

After another moment Suirei said, "I don't think you need thornapple."

"You don't?" Maomao said.

"It was written in a formula from another country. But I think the intention was to sustain a catatonic state in order to artificially produce slaves. I've heard that was the drug's original application." Then she held up her shivering left hand—a limb that had worked perfectly well before. The shaking was a result of the resurrection drug. "I got off with no worse than this, but a serious mistake could have cost me my memory."

She didn't talk as though that were speculation; she sounded sure—so there must have been other test subjects besides Suirei. Creating a drug demanded a commensurate price. Trial and error was the only means to figure out the proper way to proceed. Maomao was well aware that this involved human testing—but she couldn't suppress her other feelings about the subject.

"What about the revised formula, then?" Maomao asked, leaning slowly toward Suirei, her eyes widening, feeling gooseflesh all over her body.

"We've only tried it on animals," she said. Not humans, then. After all, for all they knew, they could be wrong: it might turn out that without the thornapple, the subject never revived at all. Of course one would try it on animals first.

Maomao's eyes sparkled, and she leaned in so close that she was practically nose-to-nose with Suirei. She placed her hand on her own chest, indicating that *here*, right here, was the perfect experimental subject.

"We're not trying it on you."

"Why not?! Be my guest!"

"You're our hostage," Suirei said flatly. Maomao had to resist the urge to grab her by the collar and shake her until she acquiesced to giving her the drug. She couldn't waste this chance to find out more about it. Instead she simply backed down.

"Hee hee! It's so nice to see you two getting along," Shisui chirped, taking a bite of fried bread. "After all, you and Maomao could both use some more friends, Big Sis."

"Shut up," Suirei snapped.

"Quiet," Maomao said at the exact same time.

They certainly hadn't meant to speak in unison, but there it was.

Maomao was sleeping in the same room as Suirei, while Shisui took the other room, the one with just a single bed. She whined that she wanted to sleep with the other girls, but Suirei chased her out and she went away muttering to herself.

It wasn't as if Maomao and Suirei were spending the night chatting and gossiping. They hadn't last night, and they wouldn't tonight. Frankly, there wasn't much Maomao wanted to say to Suirei, but even if there had been, she doubted Suirei would have responded much.

Maybe Maomao should have started by asking what the girls were after, but she never had. Finally, she thought maybe she should—but when she opened her mouth, she found a completely different question coming out.

"So you're pretty close with Shisui, it seems?"

"You think so?"

"Looks that way to me."

That was the end of the conversation. Well, then. It showed how much of a social buffer Shisui provided for Suirei.

When she got up the next morning, Maomao discovered a profusion of books on the table, lavishly illustrated encyclopedias of medicinal herbs. There were even some foreign volumes mixed in among them, depicting a

wide variety of plants Maomao had never seen before. She was unable to read most of these books, but here and there papers were tucked among the pages with notes or translations.

"I'm going out. There's a guard outside, so don't get any ideas about running away," Suirei said as she left the room.

"I wouldn't worry. I don't think she'll want to," commented Shisui, who was already up and having some congee for breakfast.

"What'd you do to get a guard posted on you?" asked the little shit, Kyou-u, who was there for some reason. He was dipping some fried bread in his congee. He was annoying, yes, but Maomao wasn't bothered; she was more interested in reading through the treasure trove of books in front of her.

"Huh? Not gonna eat?" Shisui asked.

"Later. I can wait," Maomao said, intent on at least flipping the pages. Shisui, however, shoved some congee-softened bread in Maomao's mouth. She chewed obligingly.

"How about a change of clothes? You're still in your sleepwear."

"Later. I can wait."

"It bugs me." Shisui loosened the belt of Maomao's pajamas; Maomao obediently stretched out her arms and kept reading while Shisui slid an overgarment onto her.

"Geez, lookit this girl. She must think she's hot stuff. She acts like Lady Shenmei," Kyou-u said.

Shenmei? Maomao was wondering who that was when Shisui smacked her in the small of the back. She rose out of her chair so Shisui could slide a skirt on her.

"Yeah, thanks, Kyou-u. Go clean up your bowl."

"Aw, why should I? Isn't that what servants are for?"

"So you can't do anything without the servants? My, still such a child, I see..."

She knows how to press his buttons, Maomao thought; and indeed, the little boy who wanted so much to be seen as a grown-up did an about-face, noisily picking up his bowl and putting it on a tray and carrying it out of the room. Maomao half watched him, then nodded appreciatively. "He's from a decent family, isn't he?"

"He he. In the land far to the east, they have a saying: 'the mighty must wane.'" She seemed to be saying that everyone, no matter how strong,

eventually got old. That any house, no matter how great, would ultimately fall.

Maomao paged quickly through the books while Shisui moved on to her hair. “Where’s your hair stick from yesterday, Maomao?” Maomao pointed silently at the bedroom. Shisui jogged in and took the hair stick from beside Maomao’s pillow. Then she combed Maomao’s hair and tied it up. She let one bunch drape beside each ear, holding them together with hair ties. “This is a really nice hair stick,” she said. “You have to be careful with it. You wouldn’t want someone to steal it and sell it.”

“Think it would be worth much?”

“Worth much?” Shisui flourished the hair stick in front of Maomao’s face. “Whoever made this was a very talented craftsperson. There aren’t many of them in the capital. If an expert looked at this, they would know who had made it, and from there, who was likely to have placed the order. Just look at the care they put into the design they carved in it, all the little details you won’t even see.”

Maomao remembered once when a courtesan had sold off an accessory a customer had given her as a gift, only to have the same customer buy it from the pawn shop and give it to her again as a present. It hadn’t been comfortable. And she knew how persistent the giver of this particular hair stick could be, leaving her with the uneasy sense that it would one day come back to her.

“I can’t sell it,” she said finally.

“Only thing to do is to melt it back down for the metal, then,” Shisui said, but somehow Maomao thought that felt wrong too. “It’s still...lacking something,” Shisui said. She reached up and pulled the hairpin off her own head, placing it in Maomao’s hair instead. “There, that’s perfect.”

“You’re used to this.”

“You get pretty good at it when you’re beaten for being too slow,” she said, the words sounding as natural as anything.

“Beaten?”

“Uh-huh.”

It was hardly uncommon for a maid’s employer to discipline her, but this sounded strange to Maomao.

“If I couldn’t give a decent massage, I got boiling water poured over my hands. I was so scared of it,” Shisui said.

“That is scary. Sounds like your mistress was a terrible person.”

The old madam had meted out discipline to Maomao more than once, but even that old bag knew where to draw the line. Hit ’em where no one will see it; slap ’em so it won’t leave a mark. Sure, she was probably thinking at least in part of making sure she didn’t lower the value of her merchandise, but it was still a kind of mercy.

“Heh! That was my mother!” Shisui said, laughing.

“Hope I never meet her,” Maomao said, wondering what kind of mother would treat her daughter that way. *No... I guess some are worse,* she thought, looking at the disfigured pinky finger on her left hand.

“I get that. And that’s why you have to be sure to just do what you’re asked, Maomao.” Shisui began putting away her comb. “I’ll be going out today,” she added. Then she left the room.

It had been perhaps six hours. When Maomao got hungry, food was brought to her from the inn’s kitchen. And there were so many books to read. The only thing she really had to frown about was that when she used the bathroom, her guard—a man—had to accompany her.

When she had gone through the books from cover to cover and learned all that was in them, Maomao gave a big yawn. She was sore from sitting so long. She poked her head out the window to get some fresh air. Her room was on the third floor of the inn, the uppermost story, and as there were no taller buildings around, it provided a spectacular view.

She could see steam drifting up from hot springs here and there. No, she couldn’t peep down on anyone from her elevated vantage point—the baths were suitably covered—but even so, she could see most of the village. Beyond the palisade, a river flowed among rice paddies, and she could see the forest surrounding it all. The harvest was mostly over, the paddies bereft of their crop, which was now hanging out to dry.

Hm?

She spotted one field that hadn’t been harvested. Just a corner of it, actually: there, the rice still hadn’t ripened. It was standing smack in the shadow of a building, maybe a storehouse for the crop or something. It was quite an impressive piece of architecture.

She recalled what the children had said the day before about a place where the rice didn’t grow well. Maybe that patch was going unharvested while the

owner waited for the crop to mature. Maomao stroked her chin: *Hmm.*

The plot didn't appear to be malnourished. And it was strange: the leftover part of the crop occupied a perfect square, tucked just within the shadow of the building. *Could it be...?*

She leaned out, staring intently at the patch of rice—when there was a huge crash. Maomao almost tumbled out the window in her surprise. She managed to grab hold of the window frame, though, and then took a second to steady her breathing.

"What're you doing?"

It was the little shit! He'd come into the room, throwing the door open as hard as he could. Maomao marched over, stopped in front of Kyou-u, and, without another word, gave him a noogie.

"Ow! That *hurt*! What's wrong with you?"

"*You* should learn to enter a room more quietly."

True, she'd struck him partly out of sheer spite, but it was his fault too. Maybe if he could have watched his mouth.

When she finally let him go, Kyou-u looked at her reproachfully. "All right, you. Where's my big sis?"

"Not a clue." Shisui hadn't told Maomao where she was going.

"You should've asked her!"

Maomao wasn't sure Shisui would have answered. Anyway, the field was of more interest to her at the moment.

"Why d'you keep looking outside?"

"Do you have any idea what that building is? Is it a storehouse?"

"Huh?"

Maomao pointed to the structure on the edge of the village. It was the biggest of several around it.

"Aw, that's the chief's storehouse. I guess all the fields around there belong to him."

"So I was right..."

"Uh-huh. But they don't use it much," Kyou-u said, opening his mouth with its ridiculous gap in his front teeth. "We've got these other storehouses with high floors, to keep the rats out, and that's where they put everything. That building over there, I don't think they're even using it right now."

"But it's still there."

"Yeah, 'cause the chief's a skinflint. He won't even pay to have it

knocked down."

Maomao's response was a heartfelt: "Huh."

Huh? She stepped away from the window and began to page frantically through the book she had just finished. *I'm sure it said...*

She found one of the pages with a piece of note paper stuck to it and swallowed heavily.

No doubt Shisui and Suirei had assumed that having so many books to read would keep Maomao quiet, but they had failed to reckon with the nature of her curiosity. It was an emotional force that bubbled up from within her, filling her entire body. She found it almost unbearable to be just sitting in this room reading.

"H-Hey, what's going on? You look...scary," Kyou-u said.

No! Damn. Her personal quirks were showing themselves again—and when she got like this, she couldn't stop them, even if she knew intellectually that she should. Even if they were about to cause her to do something impossibly foolish.

But if she had been any other way, she wouldn't have been Maomao.

"What, you want to go there?" Kyou-u asked.

Yes, but there was a guard outside. And she couldn't get out the window; they were three stories up. Actually, getting out wasn't impossible: she could use sheets to make an improvised ladder, or even work her way down clinging to the wall if she really wanted to. But it would have been much too obvious. The window faced the street, and she would have been noticed and recaptured immediately.

"*Can* I get there?" she asked, not really expecting much.

Kyou-u smirked at her. "It's not impossible."

"Tell me how." Maomao's eyes were round. Kyou-u, evidently pleased by this reaction, trotted over to the adjacent room, the one Shisui slept in. "C'mon, help me," he commanded. Maomao wondered what she was helping with—it turned out to be pushing a chest of drawers. She pushed, not entirely sure why, but then with a heavy scrape the chest began to move, revealing a door behind it. "This actually goes to the room next door," he said. "That one's mine."

Placing a large chest of drawers was certainly one way to divide off the rooms in whatever manner was desired.

"And there isn't another chest on the other side of the door?"

“It’s fine. I moved it already. I thought maybe I could give Sis a good fright, but this thing was in the way.” Then Kyou-u opened the door. It wasn’t even locked; it must have been assumed that no one would actually bother to move the chests on both sides of it.

Kyou-u’s space was laid out the same way as the sleeping chambers Maomao and the women occupied. The bed was covered with a mess of paper and brushes. She was reminded of a thought she’d had when they were painting the masks—that in spite of appearances, the brat was quite the little artist.

“C’mon, this way,” Kyou-u said, but he wasn’t pointing at the exit. The bedroom looked the same as in Maomao’s space, but the living room was a little different. Unlike the decorative window in her room, this one had a big door that led onto a balcony. The balcony ran past the next room over, and the room beyond that; there were dividers, but they were just decorative bars that it would be easy to slip past.

“Go as far as you can, and you’ll see the roof of a covered walkway that leads to a separate building. Jump down and you can get away, no problem.”

The separate building was behind the inn, so she would probably escape notice as long as she was careful.

“You really know your way around.”

“Heh heh. I’m the only one who doesn’t have any studying to do.” In other words, he’d been sneaking out of here every day. The brat seemed awfully knowledgeable about this town for someone living in a travelers’ lodge; he must have been here quite a while. At bath resorts, it wasn’t uncommon for people to stay for long stretches as they sought to cure an illness. Kyou-u, though, didn’t appear weakened by any kind of condition.

Maomao, not particularly interested in pursuing the subject anyway, slipped through the bars, grateful that she was such a twig. Kyou-u followed her. She looked at him as if to ask what he was doing, and he said, “If you’re gonna go to all the trouble of sneaking out, I figure I might as well come with you.” He sounded awfully condescending.

Bah, fine.

And that was how Maomao finally escaped.

Once Maomao was out of the inn, the rest was easy. Unlike when she’d entered the village, the guard was more than happy to let her out (maybe because it had been dark when they’d arrived). The fields, empty after the

harvest, gave her a good view of whether there was anyone around, and she didn't expect any trouble with wild animals in broad daylight.

"So, uh, what're we doing?" Kyou-u asked.

"There's something I want to check," Maomao answered, and then they were there: standing in front of the as yet unharvested patch of rice.

Kyou-u tore off an ear of the crop. "Think they just aren't getting enough nourishment here?"

"Unlikely." Maomao looked at the storehouse next to the field. There was a big window in the plaster wall—a simple opening without bars or anything, though at the moment it was shut tight. Maomao picked up a twig and used it to compare the width of the window with that of the patch of rice. The rice patch was slightly larger.

"I think this rice gets light on it all night long," Maomao said.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

A growing plant could be influenced by changes in the environment. Just as Maomao had induced her blue roses to bloom out of season, something external might have affected this rice. Generally, plenty of light was beneficial for plant growth—but there were times when it could be just the opposite. Maybe the constant light, even during the night, had caused this rice to mature slowly. Something similar sometimes happened near the pleasure district, itself a place that never slept.

"You mean the rice didn't grow because it's always bright?" Kyou-u asked.

"Just my guess," Maomao replied.

Judging by the location and size of the window, though, she seemed to be on the right track. Since it had no bars, it was probably left open all during the long, hot summer days of work. That, however, raised a question: why would there have been a light on all night in a supposedly disused storehouse?

Maomao had a thought about that. "I assume there are rats here."

"Oh, yeah. Doesn't matter how many traps we set, they keep coming."

"In other words, you could catch as many as you wanted."

She thought back to what Suirei had said. About how the new drug hadn't yet been tested on human subjects. It had, however, been tested on animals—and what kind of animal might it have been tested on? Something small and easily caught, perhaps? Moreover, the books Maomao had been given

contained several marginal notes detailing the results of experiments on rats.

There had been too many books in the room for Suirei to have been carrying them all around by herself. They must have been brought from somewhere in the village. Maomao did a quick circuit around the storehouse. In addition to the window, there was a single door, but it was locked.

"Move." Kyou-u suddenly had a piece of wire in his hand; he worked noisily at the lock for a moment, and soon undid the simple latch.

This kid's trouble, Maomao thought. But she was also grateful for his help. They entered the storehouse to find it divided into two rooms. Maomao decided to start with the one with the window.

She found both exactly what she expected—and much more. What she expected was the rats in cages; they were accompanied by a veritable pile of papers covered with notes, not to mention the bones of mysterious animals, dried herbs, and what appeared to be some kind of innards. They carried a very distinct smell.

There was a shelf lined with small bottles. A piece of paper was posted by each one with a date, the ingredients, and the amounts thereof. Kyou-u was looking at them with interest—but it distracted him from the far more shocking thing in the room.

It looked like a metal tube, but it was in pieces; it would have been impossible to tell what it was from the individual bits. But Maomao recognized it. It was a feifa gun, like the ones the assassins had used in the attempt on Jinshi's life.

What are these doing here?

Their presence would explain a good deal—but there was no time for Maomao to gather her thoughts, for there was a loud *click* from outside. Maomao slapped a hand over Kyou-u's mouth and hid in a corner of the room.

"Hm?" said a woman slowly. "Is anyone here?" Her footsteps went *clack-clack-clack*. "Perhaps someone forgot to lock the door?"

"No, ma'am, I highly doubt it," a man's voice replied. But there were more than two sets of footsteps.

"And yet it was open. Who was it who was supposed to lock up?" The words were slow, almost languorous, yet for some reason, her tone sent a shock of fear through Maomao. And it seemed she wasn't the only one. Kyou-u was shaking in her arms. Very slowly, she took her hand off his

mouth.

"—ad..." he whispered. She gave him a questioning look. "This is bad. It's *her*..." His face was twisted.

The footsteps came closer, and with them came another new aroma, mingling with the unmistakable smell that already filled the room. There was a rustling of cloth that suggested the woman was looking one way and then the other, but Maomao could only see her feet. Or rather, their feet: there appeared to be six women's feet and four men's. Or was that just two feet belonging to men? The other pair was dressed in a man's outfit, but Maomao thought she recognized it—it was the one Suirei had been wearing that morning.

"Any pro*blems*?" one of the women asked. She had a distinctive accent—something else Maomao recognized. She began to shake all over, sweat pouring off her, but she saw it: the woman's eyes were covered by a veil. It covered her hair, too, but it couldn't conceal the color of her eyes. A piercing sky blue—a foreigner's eyes.

"No, it's nothing. It seems I was imagining things." The woman turned and made to leave the room. Maomao was just about to let out the smallest breath of relief—but then the woman reached for the waist of the man, whom Maomao assumed was a guard.

The next instant, Maomao caught her breath again as a bit of her hair went drifting to the ground. A sword was lodged in the wall beside her, still vibrating audibly. It had happened so quickly that she'd hardly seen it. The next thing she knew, however, the curtain had been pulled aside and an older woman was staring down at her. She was in her fifties, perhaps, dressed in ostentatious makeup and clothing—she was beautiful, but age would have its way with her in time.

The woman wore hair accessories as garish as her outfit, and there were nail caps on her pinky and ring fingers that extended the nails by a good two *sun*. Her rouged lips curved gracefully as she stared down at the puny girl curled up in front of her.

"It's just another rat," she said, and she did indeed look as if she were staring at a filthy rodent. "Suirei."

"Yes, ma'am." Suirei took a step forward—and the woman struck her hard with the folding fan she was holding. Maomao privately gasped.

"You need to at least keep your rats under control."

“I’m very sorry, ma’am,” Suirei said, her eyes on the ground.

“Hmm? This boy, I know him.”

“L-Lady Shenmei, I’m s-s-sorry...” Kyou-u was trembling violently; it was all he could do to squeeze the words out.

“That’s honorable Shirou’s son,” Suirei said, even as she pressed a trembling hand to her face.

“Hm,” was all Shenmei said. Then she turned to the other woman with her. This person was about the right age to be her daughter, and like the woman called Shenmei, she was wearing garish makeup.

“Mother, dear, it’s only the mischief of some little children. Let’s hurry and go,” this other woman said. There was no trace of the innocent lilt that normally characterized her speech. She’d put aside her village-girl outfit in favor of a lavish dress. Her hair was tied up high, and decorated with an accessory in the shape of a bird from a foreign land.

So that’s what was going on...

Maomao had deliberately decided not to pursue the matter. She’d been on the verge of asking back when the connection with Suirei had first become apparent, but then she’d chosen not to. She’d been so sure that it wouldn’t matter what she knew or didn’t know—but now it seemed perhaps she should have taken things a little more seriously.

Now who’s the tanuki?

“Heh heh. I’ve got an idea. Since they’re here, why not bring them along?” said Shenmei. Age had somewhat dimmed her beauty, yet in her time she must have been astoundingly lovely. She was smiling, but Maomao felt that smile grasp her heart like an iron vise.

“You don’t mind, do you, Loulan?” Shenmei said—to Shisui.

Chapter 15: The Stronghold

They left the hot-springs town and bumped along in a carriage for half a day, until they arrived at some kind of fortress. Maomao was deposited in one of the rooms.

"I never intended to bring you here," Suirei informed her. Her cheek was red and swollen. She'd always seemed quiet and serious, but her expression was darker than ever now. She'd never exactly been the cheerful type, but a cloud seemed to hover over her. Maomao understood why, having observed the exchange in the storehouse.

Maomao had snuck into the storehouse, where she'd been discovered by a middle-aged woman called Shenmei. And Shenmei had called Shisui by the name Loulan.

I see it now, Maomao thought. She'd had an inkling—it would have been strange if she hadn't noticed anything. Maomao had met Consort Loulan only once, when she gave a special class to the Emperor's four favorite ladies and their ladies-in-waiting. Loulan, dressed in garish apparel, had taken in the lecture with hardly a twitch of her face. Consort Gyokuyou—having a perfectly pleasant time—and Consort Lihua—ever studious—had asked questions. Consort Lishu had been in no condition to ask anything, as Maomao recalled. But Consort Loulan not only hadn't asked anything, but had hardly spoken at all the entire time.

Maomao hadn't given it much thought—of course a noble wouldn't feel obliged to speak to a mere serving woman like her—but now she understood. Maomao had realized Shisui—no, Loulan—was well-bred by her possessions and the nuances of her behavior. She'd hidden from the Empress Dowager so she wouldn't realize who Shisui really was. Probably the same reason she'd gone to another consort when Lishu had appeared in the bath. Maomao, meanwhile, hadn't noticed anything amiss when they'd first met over Maomao, the cat, so Loulan hadn't been particularly careful around Maomao after that.

She's quite an actor, though. Other than her notable predilection for bugs,

Loulan was a perfectly ordinary young woman. She could munch on snacks with Xiaolan and chat about the latest gossip. She was like a tanuki, fabled for its ability to transform itself. Her disguise had fooled them all.

"Let's put her to the whip," Shenmei had said upon finding Maomao. She sounded almost cheerful; her voice had all the gravity of someone suggesting a tea party in the garden. "Do you suppose a hundred lashes would do? Go ready a whipping post."

"Lady Shenmei..." Suirei began. Shenmei's hand moved the instant she began to speak, the folding fan she was holding connecting with Suirei's cheek once again. Suirei took a step back, but remained expressionless and looked at the ground. She was pale and her hand was trembling slightly; her breath was coming in the same quick pants as it had after their encounter with the snake.

This is bad, bad, bad, Maomao thought, feeling herself start to sweat all over. She understood now why Kyou-u was shaking so hard: this woman was dangerous. There were certain nobles you never wanted to meet, and this woman was one of them. Worse, Maomao was less than an insect in her eyes. She'd been discovered sneaking around where she didn't belong; of *course* the woman would have her finished off under the guise of "disciplining" her.

"And what about this little child? What shall we do with him? I suppose he does need to be taught some manners."

Kyou-u, terrified, clung to Maomao.

"Honored mother..." Loulan, the ostentatious hair stick bobbing in her hair, stepped forward, her voice like the chill ring of a bell. "Didn't you say that we needed a new apothecary?" Then she looked at Maomao, but her eyes were vacant, like they belonged to a porcelain doll.

Shenmei's face contorted for a second, but then she hid her mouth with her folding fan and studied Maomao. "She doesn't look like any apothecary I've ever seen."

"I agree. But believe it or not, she's more than thirty years old. She's spent her days testing medicines on herself, until she's come to age more slowly than normal people."

Loulan took Maomao's left hand and rolled up her sleeve, revealing the bandage-wrapped arm. "I know not which concoction it is. But one of them seems as if it may be connected to the elixir of immortality. She may find it,

presuming she doesn't fail and die as the last man did." Loulan sounded downright nonchalant.

Elixir of immortality? "The last man"?

Shenmei knitted her brow, clearly disappointed by this. "If you say so. I suppose that's that, then." She flipped the shawl of her dress back and turned to the foreign emissary watching from behind her. "Shall we resume our discussion, then, Lady Ayla?"

Shenmei somehow managed to sound condescending despite the respectful term of address. The foreign emissary with the veil over her head followed after her. Both, however, were women of no small pride, and each looked less than friendly toward the other as they walked along.

Maomao was once again about to breathe a sigh of relief when Shenmei stopped. "This apothecary of yours can't possibly do proper work in this place. Let's bring her back to the stronghold with us." A nasty little curl came over her rouged lips.

Which brings us to the present moment.

Maomao found herself in a storage space that was, she was told, the room the previous apothecary had been using. It was a bit of a mess, but there was certainly apothecary-ish stuff lying around, and a wicker trunk crammed to bursting with books.

Maomao looked at Suirei. "You're half-sisters? Different mothers?" She wasn't asking so much as confirming.

"She's the only one who treats me like her older sister."

What was there to say except that this helped everything make sense? She'd heard Loulan was Shishou's only daughter. Considering how fearsome his wife was, she hardly seemed like the type to afford equal treatment to a child she hadn't borne herself. Indeed, it seemed she hardly wanted Suirei to exist.

"Lady Shenmei despises me. It drives her to these things," Suirei said, rubbing her red, swollen cheek.

Maomao had a thought. "May I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Is it possible that Shisui was *your* name first?"

Loulan seemed inordinately fond of the name Shisui. It was a perfectly ordinary name, but it combined the *Shi* of "the Shi clan" with the *sui* of

“Suirei.” Far too simple as pseudonyms went. Anyway, the more common versions of the name would have used the character “purple” for *shi*, or perhaps “offspring.” Loulan had chosen some unique characters, but the name sounded the same.

“That’s right,” Suirei said. “But when Lady Shenmei came back from the rear palace, she couldn’t bear the thought of me. And she hated that one of the characters in my name was related to the clan.”

First Shenmei had chased the young Suirei and her mother out of the mansion, then treated them like servants. Finally she’d taken even Suirei’s name, giving it to her own blood daughter as if it were a simple childhood moniker. As if she had done it out of spite.

Thus Shishou had two daughters, yet one of them had been raised in the lap of every courtly beauty, to be offered as a flower to the Emperor, while the other was shrouded in darkness to sow discord in the rear palace. Now Maomao saw why the assassins had made that attempt on Jinshi’s life—if they were Shishou’s agents. Even Maomao had heard more than once about the sharp difference in opinion between the two men about how the rear palace should be run.

But something still bothered Maomao. She took the hair stick from her hair and looked at it. Shisui—no, Loulan—had told her it was valuable. Yet there was someone who could afford to simply give it away. Someone who wielded great influence even outside the rear palace despite his youth.

Jinshi. The man who was more than just a eunuch—indeed, who wasn’t even a eunuch. Maomao stared at the hair stick—but then she stopped.

“What is it?” Suirei asked, watching her.

“When you entered the rear palace as a eunuch, how did they examine you?”

“Bit of an abrupt question, isn’t it?” Suirei said, looking at the ground. One might almost think she was embarrassed. But then she said, “It’s a physical exam. They feel you, just over your undergarments. You don’t even have to take anything off.”

That was how Suirei had been able to get in. She’d never had what they were looking for—and it probably never occurred to them that a woman might sneak in disguised as a eunuch. But it was easier than getting a man past the same hurdle.

“Any chance an uncastrated man could do it?”

“Three officials check you, from three different departments. It would be tough to bribe everybody.”

If any one of the three didn’t take the bait, the others could expect worse than a little beating when it came out that they had let a man into the rear palace. Too much risk for a little pocket change. You’d never get all of them to go along with it.

So then—how had Jinshi gotten in?

“Only a few men can come and go in the rear palace as they please...” Namely the Emperor and his immediate relatives. *No... The ages don’t match up. But...*

She’d often thought that Jinshi was younger than he looked. Not a child—she wouldn’t go that far—but he gave a distinctly youthful impression. Although she suspected all too few other women in the rear palace would agree with her.

Maomao didn’t say anything for a long moment. “What are you thinking?” Suirei asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

All right, better set that aside for now.

Come to think of it, she felt like Jinshi had been trying to have some kind of important conversation with her when they’d been on that hunt—might it have had something to do with this subject? If she hadn’t noticed, it was his fault for having such superb ox bezoars around. Ox bezoars made people insane. Fearsome things!

But anyway, she had to think about the situation she was in now. They’d traveled about a half day by carriage from the hot-springs village. Judging by the position of the sun as she’d been able to make it out through the curtain, they’d gone north. Partway through the journey the landscape had turned white, and snow had begun to fall.

So we’re either well to the north or up in the mountains, Maomao thought. Shenmei had spoken of a stronghold. And indeed, this place had high walls all around and a cliffside at its back. More a stronghold than a castle. *That courtly-looking woman...in a stronghold?* She didn’t seem like the type to set foot in such a place. Then again, that could just be Maomao’s bias; she knew from experience how tough and stubborn noblewomen could be. But this seemed like pushing it.

It was almost as if Shenmei saw herself as at war.

Wait...!

Maomao thought of the feifa she'd seen in the storehouse. She thought about how unusual it was that a foreign emissary like the woman called Ayla should even be in a place like this. *So that's what's going on...*

There'd been rumors for some time now that the emissaries had been in secret talks with someone or other. What if it had been the Shi clan? What if that was how the brand-new feifa had arrived?

And what if the gun had been disassembled in order to understand it—so that more could be produced?

"Are you planning to start a war?"

Suirei, who had been about to leave the room, stopped. "It's not my decision to make. Considering what *Lady Loulan* said, I'd suggest you get started on the medicine."

"Oh, you don't have to ask me twice. You don't have to ask me at all."

"Good. There'll be food. There's a toilet in the next room down the hall if you need it. And whatever you do, don't make Lady Shenmei mad."

Yes... Whatever I do...

Maomao didn't know what kind of discipline would await her if she failed to heed this advice. But Suirei left the room without a backward glance.

All right, what to do now? Maomao looked around the room, thinking. The entrance was locked; there were bars on the windows, and the ground outside was piled with pure, white snow. Suirei hadn't bothered to tell her not to try running away. Was that because escape was impossible? Or was it her way of saying: *If you're going to do it, at least do it right*?

She opened the door to find a narrow hallway, at the far end of which was the restroom. Such facilities were normally located outside, or at least on the first floor—but she was on the third floor here. It couldn't be easy to keep the thing clean. But evidently they were less concerned with convenience than with preventing any opportunity for escape.

They said there was another apothecary here before me... Had he been confined too? They said he'd died trying one of his own concoctions. Hrm. It almost made sense, and then...it didn't. Maomao crossed her arms and decided to let the subject lie for the time being. There were more important things to do.

Yes—things like...

Maomao began to smile as she approached the packed wicker trunk and

opened the lid. It was all but overflowing with books. She was curious about the medicine cabinet along the wall, as well, but this could come first.

"Ah... Ahhh!" she exclaimed without meaning to. To her, the wicker trunk may as well have been a treasure chest. She began rifling through the contents, cackling like a madwoman.

It was always Suirei who brought her meals, which consisted of soup and a side vegetable—not bad, even if they did tend to be a little cold. There were a lot of dried ingredients, though; they could almost have qualified as field rations.

Maomao sat on her bed with her legs crossed. She'd had a look through all the books in the room. She thought it had taken about five days, although it was hard to be sure. It wasn't exactly good manners to rest her chin on her hands and her elbows in front of her, but there was no one here to scold her.

A war. What a thing to stumble on.

Maomao glanced out the window for a moment. Everything was white outside—she suspected the harvest was over, and they were approaching the time of year when there would be no farming to do. She thought she'd heard it said once that war was something that happened when the farmers had too much free time.

From what she could see through the window, they appeared to be on very high ground with a mountain at their backs. Not a bad location for a stronghold. She sketched a map on the tabletop with her finger. If they were in the northern lands, Shihoku-shu, then this stronghold must have been located right on the country's border.

Maomao tossed herself back on the bed, grabbing her hair. She tried to picture a half circle to the north of the capital. Ten days by boat. Then walking to the hot-springs village, and then another half day by carriage. Were there any mountains in that range?

If I'd known things were going to turn out like this, I would have studied!

The exam for court ladies had included some questions about geography, she seemed to recall. But every time she'd opened the book to study, she'd only ended up falling asleep, so she hardly remembered any of it. She did remember Jinshi's lady-in-waiting Suiren jabbing her awake.

I even miss the jabbing, now.

Just then, Maomao heard raised voices from the hallway. She recognized

one of them. Curious, she hopped off the bed and put her ear to the door.

"Young master, you mustn't play there!"

"Aw, why not? I haven't explored over here yet!"

It was Kyou-u. They must have brought him here along with Maomao—she remembered Suirei frowning at the idea. She could hear other children behind him.

Wait... There are other kids here?

"What're you doing? You'll miss out on your snack!"

"Whatever! Hey, save some for me!"

Maomao, rocked by the realization that there were children in the stronghold, slid down against the wall and let out a long breath. This place might be built like a fortress, but it was all too obvious what would happen if it came to a siege.

As far as Maomao was aware, the current Emperor was a relatively merciful ruler. But there were still lines that were not to be crossed. One palace woman who had attempted to kill a high consort had been sentenced to hang, and her family mutilated. Some such measures were unavoidable if the Emperor was to maintain his authority.

Just imagine, then, what would happen if a rebellion on this scale were to be discovered. No member of the clan would be left alive. Not even children and infants. Was that why the children were here? Because someone who understood the stakes had brought them?

Maomao sighed again. She hugged her knees to her chest, resting her chin on them. She should just forget about everyone else. She didn't have time to be thinking about things like this.

And yet her heart was unbearably, inescapably heavy.

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Chapter 16: Lahan

Sometime after noon, a diminutive, fox-eyed man showed up at Jinshi's office—Lahan. Gaoshun and Basen were at the office along with Jinshi, and they were dealing with an even larger mass of paperwork than usual.

"So that's what's happened," Jinshi said.

"It's only a guess, but yes—that's what I think."

Lahan was a remarkable man. Being eccentric, but extraordinarily good at one particular thing, seemed to be a La family trait. By closely analyzing the movement of goods and metal, he had discovered that the Shi clan was up to something.

Lahan indicated a point on a map: a disused stronghold. For anyone, even a family whose loyal service stretched back to the days of Wang Mu, to rebuild an abandoned fortress for their own use could only be considered an act of treason. Jinshi wanted to clutch his head in his hands—but in deference to the fact that there was already a father-and-son team present with profound furrows in their brows, he refrained.

Just as he was telling himself that he had to focus on thinking about what to do, there was a jingle of the doorbell. He could hear footsteps approaching, and then the door was thrown open.

"Might I ask what you're doing in here?" The question came from none other than the monocled strategist.

"Ah... Father." Lahan, who had looked so confident until a moment before, frowned, folded up the map on the desk, and pursed his lips.

"Lahan, you can't just go barging into the offices of noblemen! People will get the wrong idea. *Strange* ideas!" So saying, Lakan helped himself to a spot on the office couch, the one he'd had brought here himself on one of his previous incursions. He had yet to take it back, and so it still sat there.

"Particularly when no one can tell if the noble you're visiting is a man or a woman," he went on maliciously. Basen, standing beside Jinshi, was about to step forward and offer a few choice words of his own, but Gaoshun held out a hand to stop him.

They understood why Lakan was angry. His daughter had been abducted from under their noses, right out of the rear palace. This was a man who had smashed his way into the rear palace to find his girl; the only surprise was that it had taken him this long to come to Jinshi. Very well; Jinshi would submit to his slings and arrows. That was his responsibility. But he doubted Lakan had come here merely to abuse him.

Lahan stepped back dejectedly and worked his way behind Gaoshun. So there were things even this young man had trouble coping with. He seemed to be whispering something to Gaoshun; Basen was eyeing him skeptically, clearly wondering who this abacus-wielding interloper was.

Gaoshun summoned a messenger. Whatever he was doing seemed to hold no interest for the strategist, who stretched out on the couch and gave Jinshi a cold stare.

"I understand what you're saying, Master Strategist. It was my own fecklessness that caused this," Jinshi said. And he did understand: even if this was the first he was learning about the secret passage, even if *no one* had known about it before, it had been used for kidnapping and escape, and the responsibility lay squarely with him.

"Truer words were never spoken," Lakan said. "What I want now is for you to rescue my daughter—immediately."

Ah, how simple things would have been if only he were capable of that! At this moment, Jinshi was clearly Lakan's enemy—and everyone at court knew you didn't want to make Lakan your enemy. Yet even the strategist must have realized that open feuding with Jinshi at this point would serve no one. He had another foe—not Jinshi, but Shishou.

Jinshi thought about what had brought the strategist to his office. The man before him wasn't interested in apprehending the culprits of a would-be rebellion against the throne—his priority was to rescue his dear, sweet daughter. Jinshi couldn't fathom exactly what the man might be thinking, but he had obviously decided that the quickest way to get what he wanted was to come to Jinshi.

A lower official came in with tea, but when he saw the people present—and registered the tension among them—he set the drinks down quickly and showed himself out. Nobody touched the steaming tea, which gradually went cold. If only their heads could cool off so easily—but it was not to be.

"You do a sorry job in your sorry state. And you think things are just

going to work out for you like that?"

Jinshi understood exactly what Lakan thought was "sorry" about him. He realized the strategist saw through him. Saw that Jinshi had carved out this position for himself in order to run away, because he had no confidence in what was supposed to be his true place.

The eye behind the monocle narrowed. Perhaps Lakan was hoping to make himself feel better, even the smallest bit, by cornering Jinshi in his own office. Basen looked ready to launch himself at Lakan, but Gaoshun held him back. Lahan looked on, distinctly and obviously uncomfortable.

Other sounds seemed to fade into the background; Jinshi heard clearly only the words of the strategist. "What more do you think you can do in the sorry guise of a half-man?" His voice was ruthless and cruel.

There was a long moment in which Jinshi was unsure how to respond. Finally he opened his mouth—but another, calmer voice spoke before he could.

"My apologies. I had no idea you took such a dim view of us."

They discovered a stooped old man standing in the entryway. Behind him were some eunuchs, breathing heavily; they carried a palanquin in which they had evidently brought him at a dead run. The old man, Luomen, nodded to them, then entered the office, dragging one leg.

"Not, of course, that it was my personal preference to become a eunuch," he said.

Lakan waved his hands in a mild panic in the direction of the huddled old man. "H-Honored Uncle! I meant nothing of the sort. I wasn't talking about you!"

"No? And yet here I am, a sorry half-man. Can't even walk properly. Reduced to riding around in a palanquin like a prince! In any case, am I not also culpable for my failure to have kept a proper eye on Maomao?" His aspect was almost grandmotherly; his mild gaze was upon the fox strategist. The military man with his monocle was so cowed he looked almost ridiculous.

"Phew. Just in time..." mumbled Lahan from behind them. When he whispered to Gaoshun, it must have been to suggest he summon Luomen.

Lakan, Lahan, and Luomen together made quite the spectacle. Lakan, imperious until a moment before, now acted like a young boy trying to soothe his distraught mother. Jinshi could almost have laughed out loud, but with a

struggle, he refrained. He glanced behind himself to see Gaoshun with deep furrows on his brow—probably also restraining laughter. Only Basen seemed oblivious to what was going on, the question mark all but floating over his head as he listened to this exchange between uncle and nephew.

"You always have tended to get aggressive when you're angry. But you must think of who you're dealing with when you act."

"I understand that, Honored Uncle. Even I know that much. I was simply responding in kind to what was said to me. I didn't come here with the slightest intention of going so far."

Jinshi had hardly said anything to Lakan, but he chose to remain quiet on that point for now. It was the politic thing to do.

"I should hope not. Perhaps you could tell him what really brought you here, then. *Politely*." Luomen patted Lakan on the shoulder.

Silently, Lakan turned toward Jinshi. Then he got up, knelt before Jinshi, and pressed his fist into his palm in a gesture of respect. "I come in supplication. I humbly request that you mobilize the army to strike against the rebel, Shishou."

Lakan was a grand commandant, in other words, a secretary of military affairs. Jinshi understood what it meant for such a person to ask for the army to be mobilized.

"The Shi clan appears to have been manufacturing feifa of the newest kind for years," Lahan added. "We have more than enough evidence of their treachery." He once again spread the materials he had shown Jinshi earlier on the desk. And that was not even to mention the attempted assassination of Jinshi or Loulan's flight from the rear palace.

"Corruption ought to be rooted out and destroyed as quickly as possible," said Luomen—even though he winced as he spoke. The kindhearted doctor was cut to the quick by the thought of war, even against rebels.

Moreover, he knew what it meant for Lakan to make this request of Jinshi. Why the strategist had upbraided him as a "half-man."

For the government to move against the Shi clan would mean bringing to bear the Forbidden Army—a force commanded directly by the Emperor. It was not a senior captain like Lakan who would command these troops, but the one who stood at the very zenith of this nation.

The Emperor, though, could not simply jump up and march out of the capital. As such, a substitute would be necessary.

“How long do you mean to deceive us with that assumed form?” Lakan said, watching Jinshi through his monocle. Or rather, watching the man Ka Zuigetsu, who wore “Jinshi” like a second skin.

Zuigetsu swallowed heavily. He’d always known this moment would come. Now it had.

It was time for him to face it.

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Chapter 17: Taibon

"Tell me, if you would: is my medicine ready yet?"

Exactly once per day, Maomao was permitted to leave the room in which she was confined—in order to be taken, under guard, to Shenmei.

Shenmei's room was so luxurious, one would never have believed it was in the middle of a fortress. The floor was covered by a thick rug of foreign make, and the furniture was likewise exotic. Aromas of tea and flowers and honey drifted through the air.

The mistress of the room was reclining in an easy chair, a lady-in-waiting polishing the nails of her left hand. A young man knelt nearby, massaging her feet. The room was thick with the smell of incense. Behind Shenmei was a large bed on which some women were rolling around and giggling. There was another odor in the air too: alcohol. The room was redolent of sheer decadence.

Maomao sniffed audibly. *It's some kind of mixture*, she thought. A base of musk water, cut with several other ingredients. The women lounging on the bed looked oddly lethargic—hard to tell if it was drunkenness or something else.

Loulan was behind Shenmei, munching on a snack. Suirei was combing her hair. In some other setting, they might have looked like two sisters sharing a sweet moment. Here, they looked only like master and servant.

"I believe it will take a little longer yet," Maomao replied.

"Gracious. Is that so?" With a wave of her fan, Shenmei sent Maomao back out of the room.

Once she was safely back in the hallway, Maomao let out a deep sigh. Then she saw a familiar face looking in her direction.

"Hey, apothecary." That smart-aleck tone—it was Kyou-u. (She'd never specifically told him her name, and he hadn't actually been introduced to her, hence why he simply called her "apothecary.") Behind him was a lady-in-waiting she took to be his minder, along with four other boys.

"Yes? How can I help you?" she asked politely.

What she wanted to say was: *Yeah, what is it, you little shit?* But this was hardly the time or place. Even Maomao had a sense of self-preservation, and with the lady-in-waiting—and her burly guard—present, she couldn't afford to level any abuse at him.

"Ew, creepy!" he exclaimed.

I want to smack him so bad. Maomao privately promised herself that the next time they were alone, she would give him the noogie of a lifetime. Although, sadly, it didn't seem like she was going to have the chance anytime soon.

"If you don't need anything from me, sir, I'd like to go back to my room." Maomao's situation was far from ideal, but she didn't object to what she was actually doing. She was provided with a supply of drugs that would have served admirably even in a proper medical office—even if many of them were getting old. And she was thrilled to have so many written materials to work with. Whoever the apothecary before her had been, they were quite talented.

"Hey, were there any other women in there?"

"Yes, sir."

I mean, for what it's worth. They hadn't been in much of a state to be seen by a young child. Such dissolution was not for the eyes of little boys. True, by the time she was Kyou-u's age, Maomao had been more acquainted with the copulation of men and women than that of, say, cats or dogs, and any blushing embarrassment she might once have felt at the thought was long gone. But this was different.

"So, uh, my mom's in there. Did she look okay? I know she's been busy with work..."

After a second, Maomao replied, "I'm afraid I couldn't tell you. I don't know which of the women you mean."

"Oh." Kyou-u looked downcast. There wasn't much Maomao could say. She thought she knew which woman was his mother—but she hadn't been fit to tell him about. "Guess that's how it goes, huh? I mean, Mom's busy. Maybe I should've waited back at the village for her."

So that's his story. She didn't know whose idea it had been, but it had been a wise choice. Better to have him stay at the hot-springs town than see his mother here. Maybe it had even been his mother's idea.

"If you'll excuse me," she said.

"Oh, uh, hey!" Kyou-u looked like he was about to say something to Maomao, but then he glanced around and was silent. Whatever he'd wanted to say, evidently this wasn't the place for it.

"If I may, then."

"Yeah, sure."

Maomao went back to her room.

Several more days passed, each much the same as the others. The one thing that seemed really strange to Maomao was how she could hear children's voices outside her door. *Kyou-u and the others, maybe?* Each time they approached, a lady-in-waiting would scold them and lead them away. Evidently they were supposed to steer clear of this room.

I guess I understand. Small animals were brought into Maomao's room for experimental purposes. She kept the place as clean as she could, but it couldn't exactly be called hygienic. *It does sort of stink in here.* The smell came partly from the rats, but sometimes there was a whiff of something else, something vile. A smell not unlike animal dung or rotten eggs. She often caught the smell drifting up from the stairs when she was taken to Shenmei's room; maybe they were doing something on one of the lower levels. She thought back to the disassembled feifa she'd seen at the village. Maybe they were researching the weapons here too.

I hope nothing explodes, she thought. But at the moment, she had no time to worry about such things.

The materials left by the previous apothecary showed that in pursuit of an immortality drug, many experiments had been done regarding a resurrection drug as well. Her predecessor hadn't been far from either, but neither had they been precisely close. Yet Suirei had successfully revived on the basis of these experiments—so they'd had their worth.

As for the drug that really mattered—the elixir of immortality—there were only the most basic remarks: beauty products and things that might help purify the body's systems. Well, what else could one expect? *There's no such thing as a panacea, after all. Nothing cures all ills.*

In the same way, the deterioration of the human body could be slowed, but it could never be stopped. Live a decent life, eat nutritious foods, and exercise regularly—that was the best method. But Shenmei wanted

something she could simply take a sip of and make herself ten years younger.

And there is no such thing. Maomao understood that perfectly well, yet she had her pride as an apothecary—and doing nothing was clearly not an option.

"I guess this isn't any easier for you than it is for me," she said to the rats. Then, too, while they might be there purely to have drugs tested out on them, they were being fed regularly, so they were plumper than your ordinary rat. They had one pair for breeding, and kept the rest separated, lest the fortress be overrun with ratspawn.

She considered the fact that to judge whether an immortality drug had worked, she would have to observe the rat for at least the duration of its natural life. *It's enough to make me light-headed...* According to the last apothecary's materials, rats generally lived about three years; maybe four in some exceptional individual cases. *And I'm sure as hell not going to be here for four years.*

Nonetheless, she set about making the chubby rats' food.

That was what she was doing when she heard a voice outside. There were footsteps too; it was time for the changing of the guard. *Maybe that means I'll get to eat soon.* She knew by now that breakfast and dinner usually arrived after the guard was changed.

She set down her mortar and pestle, yawned widely, and stretched her arms, making little circles with them.

Then there was a thump.

Uh...

She saw something on the ground by the doorframe. When she got closer, she discovered a scrap of paper that seemed to have gotten wedged under the door.

She opened it and found a message in a child's messy scrawl: "*Run for it. I'll draw off the guard.*" The message included a piece of wire, wrapped into a circle to fit.

Kyou-u? Maomao thought. Maybe he realized she was a hostage, or perhaps he saw that even being at this stronghold was a dangerous proposition—she didn't know which. But she saw that in his own way and despite being a brat, he was thinking of her.

Unfortunately, the thin piece of wire wasn't going to be nearly enough to open the door to this room. For one thing, it wasn't as if she didn't have

plenty of wire, and better, right in here with her. As for the plan itself, it was as simple and childish as the handwriting.

She heard Kyou-u's voice on the other side of the door. "Leggo! Let me go!"

Whatever he'd thought he would do to take care of the guard, he had obviously failed.

"*What* did you think you were doing?"

Kyou-u was in a formal seated position on the floor, his clothes slightly disheveled by his little rampage. The guard had called Suirei, who'd come in a hurry when she heard there had been an attempt to free Maomao. Maomao had likewise been dragged out of her room again.

"Whaddaya mean?" Kyou-u said, trying to play dumb.

Suirei gave him a cold look, then turned to Maomao. "You put him up to this, didn't you?"

"Whatever do you mean?" Maomao asked, discreetly crushing the piece of paper in her hand.

"Oh! That's it—I was just playing like usual when I saw that guard there was slacking off. That's what happened." Kyou-u was totally unrepentant, and Maomao figured her best bet was to play along. Even Suirei seemed to acknowledge as much. The only one who seemed to have dug in his heels was the guard, the same one who had stood at Maomao's door ever since she'd arrived here.

"Are you calling me a liar?" Kyou-u demanded.

Suirei ignored his protest, but gave him a withering stare. "So it was really nothing? Then listen: I never want *nothing* to happen again."

"Yeah, I hear you."

The guard still looked less than pleased, but all was well that ended well, as long as they could agree that all was, in fact, well.

At least it's over, Maomao thought.

Except it wasn't.

"Goodness, what's all this?"

Maomao felt a shock of fear raise gooseflesh all over her body. A *tak, tak* of footsteps sounded through the hallway. The owner must have been wearing wooden clogs for them to echo like that.

Suirei's color got worse and worse as the sound approached, and she

wasn't alone—Kyou-u and the guard both went pale as well. This was why Suirei had been trying so hard to wrap things up quickly.

And then Shenmei was there. She must have just gotten out of the bath, for her hair was damp, tied up but not very elaborately. She was wearing makeup, but thinner than usual, giving the impression that she was blushing. Behind her were two ladies-in-waiting, and Loulan.

Kyou-u's eyes sparkled for an instant when he saw them. His mouth twitched, but he didn't make a sound. Maybe one of the ladies was his mother.

"Nothing that warrants your attention, ma'am."

"No, by all means, tell me. I'm most interested as to why the apothecary is not in her room."

It was obvious that half-baked excuses weren't going to fly with Shenmei. Suirei, bowing to reality, said brusquely: "I'm given to understand that Kyou-u was playing outside this room here and distracted the guard. Purely for form's sake, I was asking the apothecary for her perspective on events."

"Oh? Have you been a bad boy?" Shenmei's gaze settled on Kyou-u, whose eyes began to brim with tears. "That won't do. If you don't behave, then we'll have to discipline you." She stood in front of Kyou-u and stroked his cheek, the sharp jade nail caps on her fingers jabbing his soft skin. "Perhaps a little smack on the bottom?"

"Lady Shenmei—" Suirei began, but she stopped mid-sentence.

"Hmm? Go on."

"Kyou-u is only a young child. And he did nothing of any consequence..." She trailed off, her voice growing quieter and quieter.

Kyou-u was still watching the lady-in-waiting behind Loulan, Suirei, and Shenmei. The woman had a vacant look in her eyes.

Shenmei cocked her head. "Well, but that must mean someone here made a very big fuss out of a very little thing." Her gaze moved to the guard.

"Certainly not, ma'am," he said.

"No? And yet it seems you're the one at fault here. And that means you have to be disciplined."

In her mind, Maomao could almost see the cruel twisting of Shenmei's mouth where it was hidden behind her folding fan. Was it possible this woman derived sexual pleasure from inflicting pain on others?

"Perhaps some time in the water prison to think about what you've done?"

"Ma'am...!"

Geez! That's outrageous. Maomao didn't know exactly what the "water prison" was, but it was much too cold to be forcing someone to stay in standing water.

Maomao doubted Shenmei cared about the reason—she just enjoyed tormenting people. Maomao wanted nothing more to do with her. But at the same time, people like Shenmei pissed her off. Maybe that's why she was speaking before she could stop herself. "You old witch."

The words slipped quietly from her mouth, but Shenmei seemed to hear them quite clearly. She was, after all, the oldest person there.

Almost before she knew what had happened, Maomao was flying sideways, her ear and temple throbbing. When she fought back the pain enough to open her eyes, she saw Shenmei, beet red, her fan upraised.

This confirms it. I'm an idiot, Maomao thought. But her idiocy wasn't over yet.

"*I* told the boy to do it," she said.

Shenmei's face contorted with rage; she looked like a mythical warrior demon. Someone less stout of heart might have wet themselves at her expression at that moment. But Maomao had plenty of experience with cruel old women.

Her problem was that this cruel old woman knew no restraint. Next, the fan came down hard on her shoulder.

"Another worthless apothecary, I see!" Shenmei spat at her, while Maomao held her shoulder. Shenmei took a breath, but her anger obviously hadn't abated. "Very well. Perhaps we can inspire some repentance. Put *her* in the water prison."

Yep. I'm in trouble now.

She'd brought it on herself. Bought and paid for. Maybe she should have kept her mouth shut, not worried about Kyou-u or the guard.

But there was another idiot there just like Maomao.

"But Lady Shenmei, then we'll be without an apothecary again."

"Hm?" Shenmei grimaced at Suirei's words. Suirei stepped forward as if to say more, but the fan came down promptly on her shoulder. "Don't move without being told."

"My sincere apologies, milady. However—"

The fan came down again, this time on her forehead, where it split the

skin, producing a trickle of red blood. Shenmei grabbed Suirei's hair and dragged her close, so that they were face-to-face. Just as Maomao was wondering what she might do, she licked the blood flowing from Suirei's forehead. Maomao wasn't sure what to think.

"However noble the blood might once have been, once sullied, it can never be clean again." Shenmei spat the combination of blood and saliva into a piece of scrap paper, then flung it at Suirei. "I can't use this any longer," she said, throwing away the folding fan she had been holding. One of the ladies-in-waiting immediately held out another one to her. Did they just carry a supply at all times? Did Shenmei beat people bloody that often?

Suirei dabbed at her forehead with a handkerchief, but she didn't move. She simply stood there, her eyes fixed on Maomao.

It seems like she has a strong sense of duty, Maomao thought. Suirei acted like she felt somehow responsible for Maomao. True, it was partly due to her own curiosity that the apothecary was now trapped in this fortress, but nonetheless Suirei was obviously trying to protect her. But she was facing far too evil a force.

Loulan stepped up behind her mother, her face impassive as she said, "Dearest Mother..."

Shenmei didn't look up from playing with her new fan. "Yes, what?"

"Since we went to all the trouble of having it made ready, I want to use... *You* know. It's been so long since we put it to good use."

What's "you know"? Maomao wondered. The way Loulan spoke made it sound deeply significant.

"Ahh. The *taibon*," Shenmei said. Suirei cringed visibly.

Taibon? It sounded vaguely familiar, but Maomao couldn't quite remember what it was.

"It's a bit on the small side, but certainly large enough for one person. I do seem to remember our last test of it being quite...effective." This time she looked at Suirei, whose face grew even more bloodless, and who clenched her fists so hard her knuckles turned white. "Yes, let's go with that today," Shenmei said with a smile. She glanced at two guards with her; they each took one of Maomao's arms and dragged her away.

Maomao found herself taken to the basement of the stronghold, down a staircase of angular stone steps to a place that was rather humid. There was a

wooden door into a circular room about two *kan* (3.5 meters) across. The floor was sunk by roughly two *shaku* (60 centimeters), but otherwise there appeared to be nothing in it. The guards shoved Maomao into the room and hung a lamp along one wall. The ceiling was high over her head; there was a single window, well out of reach.

"Sorry, kid. Lady Shenmei's orders," one of the guards said. He sounded sympathetic, for all it was worth.

A large wooden box was brought into the cell. The guard looked at it, profoundly uncomfortable. Then he opened the lid and immediately ducked out of the room and closed the door.

Something squirmed and writhed inside the chest. Something trying desperately to crawl out into the light.

Ahh... I see now.

Yes, she had heard of the "*taibon*." It was a form of punishment invented by a mad king in some ancient era. One dug a large hole and put a criminal in it. A hole occupied by creatures like those now squirming inside the box.

Maomao shivered, feeling goosebumps all over her flesh. She knew now why Suirei was so terrified of snakes.

The writhing thing raised its sickle-shaped head from the box. A long, red tongue flicked out of its mouth. It watched her with moist eyes, looking for all the world like a living rope. Some small bugs scuttled out of the chest, followed by a croaking frog.

Maomao began to laugh. "Hah... Ha ha ha!" Her eyes brimmed; a grin split her face from ear to ear. What beautiful creatures. She hadn't seen their like for a long time.

Still laughing, Maomao took the hair stick from her hair and produced the hairpin from the folds of her robe.

From the box exploded an innumerable parade of snakes and poisonous bugs.

Chapter 18: Feifa

This really came in helpful, Maomao thought. Several pieces of something resembling fish meat were stuck on the end of her hairpin—the hair ornament Shisui had given her could be split in two, and the pointy part made for an ideal skewer.

Maomao swallowed audibly as she watched the grease drip from the sizzling meat. *I just wish I had some salt. Or soy paste! Yeah, if I could have anything I wanted...*

Once the meat was good and cooked, she blew heartily on it, her cheeks puffing out. It looked a little bony, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

It tasted sort of like chicken, but there was a distinct savor of fish—because the fire had used fish oil. The meat was juicy and full of nutrients—it was almost hibernation season, after all—and the grease flecked Maomao's lips.

As she chewed, she became aware of some kind of commotion outside. She wanted to grill up her catch before the fire went out, though, so she ignored the noise, skewered another piece of meat, and started cooking. She couldn't help mumbling, "I *really* want some salt..."

That was when she realized there was a man standing before her, looking flabbergasted. "*What* are you doing?"

"I'm eating. You wouldn't happen to have any salt, would you?"

"Of course I don't have any damn salt!"

Well, it had been a bit of a long shot, admittedly.

The man looked around the room, then put his hand to his mouth with a "Hrgh!" Trying to keep himself from vomiting, it seemed. Something about him rang a bell with Maomao—a close look revealed that he was the guard who'd been part of her argument earlier. What was he doing here?

"What are you, uh, eating?"

"Snake, sir."

"...I wish you'd just said fish."

This guard said the strangest things, Maomao thought. But it was all right.

She stuffed the rest of the cooked meat in her mouth and swallowed.

"I thought this was supposed to be a torture chamber," the guard said.

"And I suppose for some it would be a living hell."

Many might have wished never to set foot in the room, but for Maomao it was a treasure trove. The cramped chamber had nearly a hundred snakes and poisonous insects in it. Some had been chopped up, or were missing their heads. The rest were crawling around dully, on account of the temperature being rather low.

How stupid can you be? Maomao wondered. What had they expected, using snakes in winter? Normally, these animals might even have been hibernating by this point—of course they moved slowly. For someone as experienced at catching snakes as Maomao was, it couldn't have been simpler to grab them and wring their necks. And the bugs weren't moving any faster. Wouldn't you expect the snakes to eat the bugs, anyway? Some of the dumb frogs went greedily after the toxic insects, then fell flat over from the poison.

Using the hairpin like a gimlet and the hair stick she'd received from Jinshi as if it were a dagger, Maomao had first killed the dangerous venomous snakes. They must have struggled to catch enough of them at this time of year, though, because most of the serpents in the box were harmless, nonvenomous creatures. Even of the insects and frogs, only about half were poisonous.

Maomao yearned to sample a few of those poisons, but this wasn't the time. Once she had dealt with the obviously venomous snakes, next came the ones she wasn't sure about. The harmless snakes she left alone. Snakes didn't go out of their way to attack people, and again, they weren't exactly moving quickly.

Nonetheless, Maomao wasn't eager to have snakes wrapping themselves around her in the cramped quarters, so she sat on top of the box they'd been held in and scattered ashes around it. She always carried medicine with her in the folds of her robes; that was her way. She really would have preferred tobacco, but under the circumstances, the best she could do was burn some particularly pungent herbs and scatter them. (She borrowed the lamp in lieu of a proper fire.)

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The guard was looking at her as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "I didn't even need to show up," he groaned.

"Yes, why *are* you here, anyway?" she asked.

He looked a bit sullen. "Miss Suirei and...and the brat, they asked me to. They said it was because you were stuck in here that we weren't being punished. The brat wouldn't shut up about me rescuing you—he said he'd give me this." The guard was holding a jade ornament. A fairly rich reward, as a matter of fact. Then he looked around, and his face was pale. "I've got to hand it to you. I would've gone nuts in here. Don't think I would have lasted. Miss Suirei said I ought to get out of here, quick. Sounds like something dangerous is going to happen."

The folds of the guard's robes were noticeably puffed out, like he'd just come from looting a burning building. When Maomao looked outside herself, she discovered a man unconscious on the ground—apparently the work of her former guard.

"I think you should run too," her rescuer said. "The smoke signal's gone up already."

"Smoke signal?"

"Yeah. The sign that an army of vengeance is coming from the capital. That's what all the noise is about." And why the guard had been able to reach her so easily.

"Thank you. You've helped me very much," Maomao said with sincere gratitude. If she'd been stuck in here, things could have turned ugly.

"All right, well, I'm out of here," the man said. "One last word of advice, if you're open to it. Directly across from here there's a stairway that leads down—but you want to avoid it. Lots of bad stuff happens down there, and it's well-traveled. If you're going to run, stay clear of the stairs. Work your way to the stables and steal a horse or something."

"Bad stuff?"

"I think they're making fire powder. You'll know it right away—it stinks to high heaven."

Maomao's eyes glinted. "Thank you again. I'll be going."

"Hey! Were you even listening to me?" the man shouted, but Maomao ignored him and headed directly for the basement.

Maomao worked her way down the stairs, keeping one hand against the

cold wall. The stones carried the vibrations of whatever was going on deeper down. When she finally got a glimpse of the lower level, she discovered several dozen men at work. Their outfits left their shoulders bare, and she detected a distinctive aroma—not the burning of sulfur so much as the fermentation of animal feces. So this was the source of the odor that had occasionally drifted upstairs to her.

There was a pile of black clumps. *Farm animal dung?* Maomao wondered. But it was too small for that, closer to the size of rat pellets, or some other small creature. She'd heard wild animal droppings could serve as a component of saltpeter—was that what they were doing with it?

The basement was warmer than she'd expected; they were probably keeping the temperature up to help dry out the fire powder they made. It was, frankly, terrifying. They had a fire pot at a distance, surrounded by a curtain to keep sparks away, but what if one of them caught anyway? Were the men down here knowing full well how dangerous this environment was? Even if nothing exploded, breathing this air for too long would eventually be toxic in and of itself. It was not a very good place to work.

The finished fire powder was being carried out via another exit. As she stood watching, Maomao heard footsteps behind her. She quickly hid behind a nearby shelf, heart pounding in her ears so hard she was afraid whoever was passing by might hear her.

When she finally saw who it was, she could only stare: it was Shisui, looking grim. Then again, perhaps it would have been more appropriate to call her Loulan, dressed as she was in an ostentatious outfit much like her mother's. She looked wildly out of place in the gloomy basement reeking of excrement.

"Loula—" Maomao started to call out to her, but Loulan didn't seem to hear; there was something fierce in her eyes as she walked into the basement. The men began to murmur as they noticed her. One of them stepped forward uneasily—he must have been the foreman. "Young mistr—"

"Get out of here, now," Loulan said, her voice ringing around the underground room. The men looked at each other, unsure what was going on. "This fortress will fall soon. I want you men to leave before it does."

She produced a large pouch from the folds of her robes and tossed it to the ground. Silver coins spilled out of it, drawing the men's attention; they started jostling each other to grab the money. Once Loulan was satisfied that

all the coins had been claimed, she took the lantern she was holding, raised it above her head—and flung it as hard as she could.

She can't be serious.

The lamp arced through the air and landed square in the drying fire powder.

"All right, get out of here. If you can," she said, that innocent smile on her face. Maomao immediately covered her ears and flung herself on the ground. Her palms were hardly enough to blunt the roar that assaulted her eardrums. Several of the men kicked or stepped on her as they scrambled to escape.

The explosions spread, first the charcoal and then the animal dung catching fire.

I've got to get out of here, fast, Maomao thought, but at just that moment, she saw someone take a dramatic sidelong stumble. Several pairs of feet stepped on the exquisite cloth of the figure's outfit, sullying it. Maomao grabbed the person's hand and pulled.

"Oh? What are you doing here, Maomao? I thought you were in one of the cells." Loulan, her hair thoroughly disheveled, looked at her in perplexity. No, it didn't seem like Loulan—in this moment, her innocent demeanor made her look like Shisui.

"I'd like to ask you a similar question," Maomao said with a touch of annoyance, whereupon Loulan reached out and brushed her cheek, her right ear.

"Are you all right? You're not hurt?"

"My guard helped me. And the snakes were delicious, thanks." Maomao understood that it had been deliberate, the way Loulan had suggested the taibon as punishment; it ended up a part of her plan in its own small way. And Maomao hadn't had snake meat for a while; she appreciated it.

"Um, I'm not sure what you mean by that. Although I did expect the punishment would suit you."

She didn't know what Maomao meant? This from the girl who happily ate bugs, Maomao thought. But it didn't matter; at the moment, they had to hurry up and get out of there.

"We're getting out of here, fast." Maomao pressed her sleeve against Loulan's mouth and started looking for some way to sneak out of the basement. Intending to escape the fortress as quickly as she could, she tried to drag the other woman along. Loulan, though, went to start up the stairs.

"The fire's only going to spread," Maomao said.

"That's all right. I *have* to go up there."

Then Loulan ascended the steps, her battered skirt trailing behind her. Smoke was billowing now, flooding Maomao's nose and making her eyes water. If the fire didn't get them, toxic fumes would.

"Wait. You're coming?"

I can't believe I'm this stupid, Maomao thought, then said, "I guess."

It would have been simple enough for Maomao to escape on her own; the men from earlier were already heading for the stronghold's exit, pushing and shoving to be the first one out.

"If my mother finds out, it won't be pretty. I know her. She'll want to know how this happened, even if it means sticking around. We'll be lucky to get off with a little whipping." Loulan looked downcast; she didn't seem like someone talking about her own mother.

"It looks like she treasured you growing up, at least, Loulan."

Loulan had said something before about being beaten if she couldn't tie hair or give a massage properly. But it was hard to imagine that happening to someone of her status.

"My mother... She can't even remember my real face." Almost as far back as she could recall, Loulan had been painted with rouge and face-whitening powder. Whatever happiness or grief she had shown had been for her mother, like she was a doll. Like she was wearing a mask.

Before she was ten, she learned of the existence of her older sister when one of the maids died after an especially vicious beating by Loulan's mother, and her father took in the woman's child. When Loulan saw her mother confront her father about it, her hair everywhere like an enraged devil's, she was convinced she was seeing hell itself.

"Mother was always cruel to my older sister," Loulan said. She realized that Shenmei must have been equally brutal to Suirei's mother, leading to the woman's death. And then she learned why Shenmei hated her older sister so much. "She asked if he intended to make a fool of her with mother and child alike. She said the daughter was like her mother, a whore who would do who knew what. It was the strangest thing, to see someone in such gorgeous clothing say such filthy words."

"Could it be Suirei is...?" Maomao remembered what Shenmei had said when she'd licked Suirei's blood.

“Didn’t you hear any rumors about it at the rear palace? There was a palace woman, the former emperor’s first victim—her child was taken from her. That woman was my older sister’s grandmother.”

That woman had died alone and forlorn in the rear palace. In her later years, her one pleasure was said to be gathering spooky stories.

“Remember when everyone almost suffocated telling scary stories? It might have been that old lady’s doing. After my mother did such terrible things to her, how could she not revile me, her daughter?” Loulan chuckled.

“We can’t even say if ghosts really exist,” Maomao replied. There was no way to know. At least, not as far as she was concerned.

“Why am I not surprised you’d say that?” Loulan said, grinning. “I *so* wanted to see my older sister. Sometimes I would sneak over to her place dressed as a maid. Mother never recognized me, and made me work.” Loulan, though, naturally wasn’t trained in these tasks, and often felt the sting of Shenmei’s folding fan. Despite the blows, she still went to see her sister. And somehow, Shenmei never realized whom she was “disciplining.” She saw only a lowly servant girl, not her precious doll who heeded her every word.

“You know why my mother and father got married?” Loulan said. “They just wanted to make me. My father carried the blood of the hidden village—supposedly the same bloodline as Wang Mu.”

Maomao thought back to the fox masks. Loulan had painted a pattern on hers like a mercurial tanuki. Perhaps for her, the world of colors was the same as it had been for Wang Mu.

“Mother kept telling me that what they wanted was for me to become a new Wang Mu.” With that, Loulan stopped in front of a room on the third floor. If Maomao parted ways with her now, she’d never find out what Loulan was planning—and she wanted to know.

“Hey...” Maomao paused for a second, unsure how to continue. Was she speaking to Loulan, or Shisui? She wasn’t sure, but in her own mind, she knew who this woman before her was. And so she said, “...Shisui.”

“Yes?” Shisui asked, smiling, her hand on the door.

“I know there were substances floating around the rear palace designed to induce a miscarriage. Did you keep some on hand too?” Shisui was still smiling. “To use on yourself?”

Shisui’s expression didn’t change. She simply opened the door. “You

really are a sharp one, Maomao. I knew it was the right choice to bring you here."

Maomao thought back to the scary story Shisui had told, about the insects with the bell-like cry. They were a kind of bug Shisui had caught at the rear palace once. And the previous apothecary here had written extensively about them in their books. You could keep them in a cage; they made the most beautiful sound. But come autumn, the bugs would eat each other. The female would eat the male. It was part of their reproductive cycle.

That seemed to have been the point of Shisui's story, but why had she chosen to tell that tale at that time? Maomao thought she knew now. *She was talking about herself.*

If she became pregnant, she would devour the child's father.

The cage was the rear palace; the male and female insects, the Emperor and his women. It wasn't a very respectful allegory, but it certainly fit. Shisui had feared it. Near the area where she'd been catching bugs, there had been lantern plants and whiteblossom—ingredients for an abortifacient.

They entered the room. There was a large bed with children sleeping on it. Kyou-u was there too; he alone was on the floor.

Must've rolled off, Maomao thought. She hated to wake them, but they had to get the kids out of there. She went over to the bed—and stopped. "What is this?"

Something was wrong. Saliva was running from the kids' mouths, and their hands clutched at the sheets. Their skin was cold. Maomao took one of them by the wrist and felt for a pulse. "He's not breathing."

On the table by the bed there was a pitcher, and enough cups for all the kids. Shisui, her eyes full of compassion, came over to the bed, reaching out to touch the children.

Maomao, furious, raised her hand dramatically upward, but fought the urge to bring it down on Shisui. "You *poisoned* them?"

"It was *medicine*..."

Maomao squeezed her trembling hand into a fist.

"We've shown our hand now," Shisui said. "Can't you see it? Our entire clan will be executed." Including even the little children. They, too, would be led to the gallows, not understanding what it was their parents had done. "I mixed it with some nice, sweet juice for them. In a nice, warm room, after we'd all enjoyed looking at a picture scroll together. I wonder if any of them

were upset about it. If maybe they wanted to sleep with their mothers. I'm sorry, little ones. But your mothers were friends with mine. Kyou-u came late... It must have been because he was trying to help you, Maomao." The hint of a smile appeared at the edges of her lips. "Him, I think he might have known. I saw him bite his lip—but he drank all his juice anyway. I really didn't want to bring him here."

"And why did you bring *me* here?"

Shisui smiled as if to say Maomao ought to know. "I'd hoped there would be another way to get you here, but it just didn't work out."

So that's how it was. Maomao let her hand drop. There was a heavy thud from outside, but she couldn't look away from Shisui's face.

"They say Mother never used to be that way, but I wonder. It's how she has been ever since I was born, at least. She would torment my older sister every time she saw her, and the young ladies-in-waiting too. She taught her female relatives to drink and debauch themselves with men. Father never said anything to her; he never could go against her. He was just waiting for her to forgive him."

Shisui's mother, this Shenmei, was insane. It was clear to see.

"She's like an insect, consuming her husband when a child is born. In fact, the bugs are better. At least they do it so their children can survive."

Shisui hated the idea of becoming a mother—so much so that she would concoct and consume her own abortifacients. Maomao could sense she was learning the most important reason for this. Not all mothers were like Shenmei. But Shenmei was the only mother Shisui had.

"I took the liberty of learning a little something about your background, Maomao. It seems like your upbringing wasn't that different from my sister's." Meaning, perhaps, that she had been raised by a former physician, or that her birth father was a high official.

"I don't have a father or a mother. Just my adoptive father," Maomao said.

"Hee! My sister says the same kind of thing. Well, I guess it makes sense. She keeps swearing she's not my big sister."

What was Shisui getting at?

"I guess she's right. There's no way she can be my sister. Our father is a tanuki. I'm sure he's got some grand plan, trying to get his hands on the Emperor's bloodline."

Not Shisui's sister? Was that her way of saying that she had no connection to the Shi clan?

What a liar.

Shisui was in fact much like Suirei—particularly with the expressionless look she now wore. Shisui adored her older sister, yet at this moment she denied that the relationship existed.

"If only these little ones were bugs, they might have been able to sleep through the winter," Shisui said, her hand brushing the children once more.

Yes, if they were bugs...

Maomao understood. She knew now why Shisui had wanted her here. Maomao looked at her without saying anything. There was just a suggestion of tears in Shisui's eyes. Maomao was about to reach out, but Shisui shook her head.

She could run away too! Maomao thought. But even Maomao had no idea what Shisui could do after that. Maomao knew nothing about politics; she couldn't have cared less about the subject. She just wanted to learn as much as she could about medicine, research and study it, and invent different drugs. That was all she wanted out of life.

It should have been enough.

Forget about other people. Put yourself first. What had they thought would happen, bringing her here?

And yet Maomao reached out her hand.

Shisui rebuffed her. "I have my own part to play. Please, don't stop me."

"Is there some meaning to this?" Maomao didn't know where Shisui was headed—but the outcome was easy enough to imagine.

"Stubbornness. Mine."

"Just forget about that!"

Shisui smiled mischievously. "Think of it this way, Maomao. Say you were presented with a poison you'd never seen before, and you were told you only had one chance to try it. What would you do?"

"I'd drink it down to the last drop," she replied immediately. What other answer could there be?

"Thought so." Shisui stood up, smiling, and went to leave the room, her steps as light as if she were simply going out to go shopping.

She's leaving...

Maomao didn't know what to do; she had no idea what this moment

called for. She tried to find the right words, but nothing came out. She could only reach out and grab Shisui's hand. "At least let me offer a prayer."

"A prayer? That's not like you, Maomao."

"Every once in a while. Every once in a blue moon." Maomao took the hair stick from her own hair and placed it in Shisui's collar.

"You know that's not my hair, right?"

"If I put it in your hair, you'd just be *too* pretty." Shisui's head was already bristling with hair sticks. These accessories were said to keep away evil spirits, but so many at once seemed apt to attract them instead. "Give it back to me sometime. It was a gift."

"You're silly. I'm going to sell it."

"That's fine, then." This particular hair stick was plain, yet of uncommonly fine make. The one who had given it to her could be especially obstinate, so there was every possibility that just like its original owner, it would somehow manage to find its way back to her.

"You've got some soot on you." Maomao held up a mirror from beside the bed.

"Oh, you're right. I look like a tanuki." Shisui laughed. She laughed, and then she looked at Maomao. "You know what you need to do." She turned away.

The door shut with a clack. Her footsteps got softer and softer in the distance.

Maomao found herself looking at the ceiling without really knowing why. Just leaning her head back and staring. The building shook with an increasingly loud series of explosions.

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Chapter 19: The Army Marches

Let's turn the clock back a little.

Jinshi was in a rocking, jolting carriage, sitting across from a man with a sour look on his face. But maybe "carriage" wasn't quite the right word. Pulled by no fewer than ten horses, this was more of a house on wheels. The floor was covered with an animal pelt, and there was a table in the middle of the cabin.

Lakan, a man renowned for his unrelenting smirk, was now glaring at a map with evident annoyance. Behind him, his adopted son was studying Lakan's and Jinshi's expressions and tucking a receipt into the folds of his robe. This man, Lahan, was the second most tightfisted person Jinshi had ever met after the madam of the Verdigris House—but on this occasion, he was more than happy to acknowledge that Lahan had saved his neck.

He felt like he might be attacked at any moment. The intervention of the eunuch Luomen had successfully soothed the worst of Lakan's rage, but it still smoldered. Attending behind Jinshi, Gaoshun was prepared to draw the sword at his hip at a moment's notice. That was the kind of reprisal one risked in raising a hand against Jinshi, but at the moment Lakan probably didn't care. Jinshi suspected he would have been just as happy to jump on top of Jinshi and beat him senseless.

The man was just that worried. Lahan, however, was proving a helpful check on him. "Father, I ask purely hypothetically, but if a man were to do violence to a member of the Imperial family, the crime would not fall on him alone, would it?" It was a roundabout question, to be sure, but it was enough to keep Lakan from doing anything rash.

To attack Jinshi would be the end of a person's family. Even Lakan's daughter Maomao wouldn't be spared. Lakan wasn't easy to fool, and he knew exactly who Jinshi was—that was why he had asked him to mobilize the army. He suspected Lahan had guessed the truth as well. Why? When he asked, he received the most La-clan-ish of answers: "Because your height, weight, chest, and torso are all the exact same number. Such people are very,

very rare." As ever, Lahan's way of looking at things was more or less inscrutable to others. "You're terribly lovely; it's only a shame you weren't born a woman," he added.

That gave Jinshi gooseflesh. True, Maomao's cousin looked and acted much like she did, but unfortunately, Jinshi didn't swing that way.

Still, he knew talent when he saw it, and he had obtained special permission for this civil official to accompany him on this military expedition.

Today, Jinshi was not the eunuch Jinshi. His hair was held in place by a silver hair stick, and he wore not his usual black official's outfit, but armor and a helmet of bluish-purple, with thick cotton underpadding.

"I hope he can distinguish victory and defeat better than we can distinguish whether he's a man or a woman." That was Lakan. He was right about one thing: the time had come for Jinshi to shed his eunuch's skin. They were leading an army and trying to coordinate several plans at once.

"Are you quite sure about this?" Jinshi asked.

"There won't be any problems," Lahan assured him. The map before them showed a stronghold with mountains at its back. The map was older, since the fortress hadn't been used in quite some time, but they had found soldiers who had once been stationed there to update it and make sure it was as accurate as possible.

It was Lahan's belief that firearms were being produced in that stronghold. The northern reaches had timber aplenty. Many wished desperately to control the place in hopes of capitalizing on its lumber resources, but the Shi clan defended it stoutly.

There were hot springs nearby as well. An excellent source of sulfur. But there was one more ingredient that would be necessary to create fire powder.

"What would they do about saltpeter?"

"Small animals like to hibernate in the area, perhaps because of the hot springs. There are large caves in the vicinity." That implied the presence of substantial quantities of bat guano. It would be possible to create saltpeter from the excrement.

Jinshi grunted. If the defenders had firearms, they were unlikely to bring individual feifa to bear on an attacking force. No, they would have something on the stronghold walls designed to ravage an advancing enemy *en masse:* cannons. Cannons; that would be the real danger.

But if Jinshi could think of it, he could be confident that Lakan was already well aware of the possibility. To him, the map probably looked like nothing more than a Go board. He pointed to the cliffside behind the stronghold.

"It is theoretically possible to overpower them before they can use their cannons," Lahan said firmly.

"You heard abacus-brain," Lakan said, bopping his adopted son on the head. The fire powder necessary to make a cannon work easily got wet. Powder might be kept near the guns at all times, but if so, it would be in an armory to keep it dry. The stronghold was at a high altitude, and snow fell there frequently. Scouts reported that this very night, the stuff was coming down heavily.

If Jinshi's forces simply advanced on the stronghold, they would be sitting ducks. Thus it was Lakan's suggestion that they should take out the powder depot to deny the enemy the use of their cannons. And the way he came up with to do it was bizarre. Bizarre—but possible. That was what made him so fearsome.

"I think it will be a *very* economical way to handle things," Lahan said. It had probably been that one word, *economical*, that had convinced him to buy into the plan. In their relatively short time together, Jinshi felt he'd gotten an impeccable handle on how the man thought.

"We must force our way in and find Maomao. Daddy will save her!"

Jinshi suppressed a grimace at the word "daddy." He couldn't be seen making faces like that.

He bit his lip as he thought of the diminutive young woman. Had she been taken as a hostage, or was there some other reason? Had she even, perhaps, gone along of her own free will? Whatever it was, she was there in the enemy camp, and he wanted to rescue her as soon as he could.

Jinshi clenched his fist. "We'll do that, then," he declared.

"Wait one moment, please," said Gaoshun. Furrowing his brow, he knelt before him. "I see a problem."

"What kind of problem?" Lakan and Lahan looked as perplexed as Jinshi.

"Have my good lords forgotten the nature of this army?"

They were leading a force more than large enough to handle a stronghold of this size. If they followed Lakan's plan, they could expect virtually no casualties.

“Are you, sirs, suggesting that the Forbidden Army would stoop to an ambush?”

Jinshi swallowed heavily and reached up to touch the hair stick on his head. It was sculpted in the shape of a qilin—a symbol of the Imperial family.

He had spent so long as a eunuch that sometimes he felt he was at risk of forgetting his true identity. At this moment, though, he was not Jinshi, and in light of who he *was*, it behooved him to subdue the enemy boldly and openly.

He understood all this. And yet the words that came out of his mouth betrayed him. “I’m in agreement with the grand commandant.”

“Understood, sir,” Gaoshun said, and obediently stepped back. His eyes were on the man behind him, and his piercing gaze made the hair on the back of Jinshi’s neck stand up.

“Most excellent. Not interested in making a drinking cup out of my own skull,” Lakan said. Then he snorted and exited the carriage, past the curtain. True, they weren’t moving terribly fast, but it was still a jump. Jinshi thought Lakan looked as if he crumpled slightly on hitting the ground—was he okay?

Lahan was working his abacus furiously, making sure there were no mistakes in the calculations.

Jinshi’s thoughts were interrupted by a voice. “—getsu.” It was Gaoshun, calling him by his true name. The crease in his brow seemed to have gotten deeper. “You’re going to have to change how you interact with the young lady after this.” He sounded as if he were admonishing a child.

“I know.” Jinshi sighed deeply, his breath fogging in the cold air. He shivered, and pulled his white hooded cloak up over his head.

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It was just past midnight when he heard the explosions. Wondering what was going on, Shishou got up, grabbing the sword he always kept by his bed.

He’d been in bed, but he hadn’t been able to sleep. The court might regard him as “the old tanuki,” but even he had little things that kept him up at night. Indeed, how could he possibly sleep? For a decade and more now, he had tried, and had found it impossible.

He heard shouting in the next room—surprise at the noise, perhaps—but it soon quieted. The voices of the women enjoying themselves returned to their

usual burble. Just one wall away, his wife must have been enjoying her wine. She seemed to revel in leading the clan women into lewdness, cavorting with paid men. It was how she had behaved almost every day since their daughter Loulan had been born, being sure to lose herself in pleasure where Shishou would know it.

The women with her had been reluctant at first, but by now they enjoyed these diversions. His wife always chose women who were already married, who had borne children, fulfilling their familial duties. She took pleasure in seeing these virtuous wives debauch themselves.

She hadn't always been like this. Shishou went out on his balcony and looked into the distance. An enemy attack, he thought. The lights of the army—perhaps the Forbidden Army—were still far away. From this stronghold on its high perch, it was possible to see many *li* into the distance. He still had time to catch a few winks.

Then Shishou scrunched up his nose—there was a strange smell in the air. Was that...sulfur? They were making fire powder in the basement. Had it exploded?

Of course. He tightened his collar. He had to do something, he thought—but he didn't move. It was pathetic, but the strength simply wouldn't come. The cunning old tanuki, favored by the empress regnant, and whom even the reigning monarch could barely look in the eye—that was not who Shishou was at this moment. Even he himself recognized it.

Holding his stomach (it had started to protrude abruptly and dramatically after his fortieth birthday) he proceeded forward, one step after the next. To get outside and find out what was going on, he would have to pass through his wife's room. That pained him more than anything.

The woman gifted to him by the former emperor—or rather, his betrothed, whom he had waited twenty years to have returned to him—had grown thorns in her time at the rear palace. When she had finally come back to Shishou, he already had a wife, and a child—Suirei.

He had never intended to get married to someone else. Even the woman who became his wife probably hadn't wanted it. She had been born in the rear palace, then banished as an illegitimate child—even though her father was none other than the former emperor.

It had been the former sovereign's wish. A request when his health suddenly began to decline twenty years ago. *"Please, care for my child,"* he

had said.

Shishou's wife came to have not only thorns, but poison.

He had to do something, and quickly. He kept repeating this to himself and finally managed to open the door. The male prostitutes looked startled, and the women, with their remaining modicum of modesty, scrambled to cover themselves with the sheets.

His wife, meanwhile, lay on a couch, taking a long drag from her pipe. Her eyes were sharp and full of contempt. "What was that noise?" she said languorously, purple smoke drifting from her mouth.

Shishou was just about to tell her he was on his way to find out when the door to the hallway flew open. Loulan stood there, covered in soot.

"What are you doing here in such a pathetic state?" Shishou's wife said.

"You're the last person who has any right to ask me that," Loulan shot back, with a pointed look at the women fighting over the covers. "All of you, who abandoned your children so you could lose yourselves in a life of excess."

One of the women, shocked back into remembering her own child by Loulan's words, made to flee the room, but Loulan slapped her across the cheek. As the woman crumpled to the ground, the male prostitutes made a break for it, realizing how desperate the situation had become.

Shishou could hardly believe he was seeing his own daughter. He'd always believed his Loulan was a prim and obedient child. She put on the outfits her mother told her to put on, like a little doll.

Meanwhile, Loulan strode into the room, sliding open the doors of the wardrobes that stood against the wall. When she opened the biggest one, she found a young woman crammed inside of it.

"My dear sister. I'm sorry. It took me a little longer than I meant."

The trembling young woman was bound hand and foot—she was being disciplined. Closely resembling Loulan, she was Shishou's other daughter, Suirei.

Loulan freed Suirei, rubbing her back gently. It was obvious from how smoothly and easily she did everything that this was not the first time this had happened. Or the second. Shishou felt his stomach plummet at the realization of how profoundly he had failed.

And then Loulan turned and looked at her father, Shishou. She smiled at him. "Father. At least take responsibility here in these last moments." He

didn't have time to ask *responsibility for what*, for she went on: "You're the old tanuki, the transforming trickster, of the fox village. Let's play our parts to the very end."

There was another roar, and this time the entire stronghold shook. Shishou grabbed onto the wall for support and worked his way back to the balcony to find out what had happened this time.

He saw flakes of snow floating everywhere. Everything to the east of the stronghold was completely white, and he couldn't see anything. At first, he didn't understand what had happened. As the haze of snow began to clear, though, he saw it: the building that should have been there was buried. The armory, as he recalled. It was now half inundated with snow.

As he stared stupidly, Loulan said, "You should have known this was an opponent you could never beat. Please, take responsibility." She, she added, would deal with her mother.

Then his daughter, her slightly scorched hair bobbing, walked over to her mother, looking downright regal, and stood before her.

Take responsibility, his daughter had said. Shishou clenched his fist, resolved.

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Chapter 20: The Ambush

These guys had to be crazy, Lihaku thought.

In front of him, Shishou's private troops cowered, overwhelmed by the intruders. They'd grabbed spears in a hurry when the attackers had appeared, but they were no match for Lihaku and his men, who had prepared thoroughly.

Lihaku was here to take the treacherous Shi clan into custody. It had to be treason: how else were they supposed to interpret the rebuilding of an abandoned fortress sixty li north of the capital? The presence of actual soldiers? It was as good as open rebellion.

Despite the size of the stronghold, to plot rebellion with nothing but this was the height of foolishness. The Shi clan leader, Shishou, was a person of considerable influence at court. He held so much sway over the Emperor that he had even been able to chase out one of the former high consorts and have his own daughter installed in her place.

Lihaku tilted his head in puzzlement as he swung his club. Had Shishou gone mad with greed, or just plain mad? Cornered though he might have felt, disappearing from the capital and holing up in a place like this was as good as asking to be treated as a rebel. Lihaku wondered if the man known all over court as "the old tanuki" would really do something so stupid.

But in any case, Lihaku was a military official. He could leave the pondering to others; he simply had to do his job.

He brought his club down on an enemy soldier's foot, then swept the man's legs out from under him. Behind him, subordinates in white cloaks tied up the overpowered enemies. Lihaku had been wearing a white cloak like theirs, but he'd tossed it off a few minutes ago because it kept getting in the way. Anyway, blood spatter showed up all too conspicuously on white. It wasn't really an appropriate thing to be wearing into battle.

It did, however, allow them to blend in with the snow. Perfect for hiding in plain sight. Especially on a moonless night.

Lihaku and his troops advanced without torches. The squadron itself had

split into two as they approached the fortress: one forward infantry unit, full of men who knew how to handle themselves in the snow and were confident of their abilities; and a second group, several li back.

It went something like this: the stronghold guards noticed the lights of the rear group, but completely missed the closer unit creeping forward in the dark. They believed the enemy was much farther away than they were.

Lihaku and his troops had a problem too, though. For several li, they had to cross an open, empty field. It might have been doable with some stars out, but with the sky black, it would be all too easy to lose their sense of direction.

Lihaku finished tying up an enemy and let out a breath. Something dropped from his collar.

"Neat idea, these things," he remarked, picking up the fish-shaped wooden object where it had fallen in the snow. It would allow him to ascertain the location of the fortress.

The little fish contained a magnet. Put it in a bucket of water and it would help you determine which direction you were going. It was a common implement on ships. The surface of the fish had been dusted with strange glowing particles, so it could be read even in the dark of night. The particles supposedly came from some mushroom that glowed in the dark.

There was another aspect to the ambush as well. Lihaku looked at the avalanche that had come down from the cliffside with no small amazement. "Whoever came up with this plan must have been crazy... Crazy like a fox."

This was one reason this stronghold had been abandoned: areas in the vicinity of hot springs tended to experience a lot of earthquakes. There had been a major one a few decades before, big enough to alter the local geography. It had shaved off part of the mountain, so that now avalanches sometimes occurred during winter. They weren't large and they weren't very frequent, but it was not a promising feature for a defensive position.

This avalanche just happened to be human-made. It was colder than usual this year, and the snow was deep. Several of the most experienced mountaineers among the vanguard had moved off, carrying fire lances. Lihaku had wondered why—this must have been the reason.

He was just crunching his way over the filthy snow when he spotted someone entering the fortress. A man, his white cloak and long black hair lovely in the night. Lihaku, who had never expected to think of any man as "lovely"—let alone in the middle of a battle—smiled wryly to himself.

One would never have expected to see this man on the battlefield at all. With his flawless features, he was at once the groundskeeper of the garden that was the rear palace and, arguably, one of its flowers. But with him, "flower" might be taken to refer to something else: the meaning of the name Ka. The man's hair, partially tied up, was held in place with a silver hair stick. Anyone who saw the design would have thrown themselves flat on the ground.

The name of their country, Li, was written by repeating the character for *sword* three times. But above those swords was a symbol meaning *grass*—or *flower*. In the whole country, there were only two people with the name Ka. And he was one of them.

He should never have been here, not normally. He shouldn't have been on a night march, walking several li in complete silence. Even this group of men chosen specifically for their physical strength were showing the strain by the end. But that man, the possessor of a face as beautiful and delicate as a celestial nymph's, clutched a willow-leaf saber and wore bluish-purple armor to indicate to those around him who he was.

It was the eunuch Jinshi who stood there, in what should have been a man's position. The young eunuch with the emperor's favor, so handsome that sometimes unsavory rumors began to circulate. There must have been more than a few slack jaws when he had stepped forward to take command, and several officials had gone positively pale. The young master was popular with both sexes, so much so that even men occasionally tried to talk him up.

Lihaku had been as shocked as anybody. Recently Gaoshun, who always served closely with Jinshi, had made a series of requests of him. One of them had been to select men from among his subordinates and colleagues who had plenty of stamina and coped particularly well with the cold. Now he knew what it had been about.

The young man no longer used the name Jinshi, but Lihaku couldn't speak the name Ka. One might write it, yes, but those who could actually say it aloud were few indeed.

Jinshi entered the stronghold, and Lihaku came up behind him so as not to be left behind. Gaoshun was nowhere to be seen, but in his place a stern-looking young warrior stuck close to Jinshi. Lihaku followed them both inside.

The interior of the fortress was pervaded by a nose-prickling smell, something like rotten eggs. Lihaku was just wondering what it could be when he saw men carrying armloads of snow downstairs. Had there been a fire on the lower level? He quickly inquired with one of the men, who confirmed that was exactly what had happened: there had been an explosion.

"I-If we don't handle this quickly, th-the mistress will..." The man trembled uncontrollably, unable to meet Lihaku's eyes. Lihaku let him go. Was it the smoke that made the man's color look so bad, or fear of this "mistress"? Maybe it was that unexpected turn that had left the stronghold defended by fewer soldiers than the attackers had expected.

Lihaku, covering his mouth, came up to Jinshi and knelt respectfully.

"You have counsel?" Jinshi asked; Lihaku was grateful that he had initiated the conversation. "Speak freely."

"As you command, sir." It was at times like this that Lihaku always wished he had learned more proper diction. "I don't believe we can stay here long with all this smoke. And I expect those inside will be in a hurry to get out."

"I realize that," Jinshi said. Lihaku cursed himself for, apparently, only stating the obvious. "However, there may be someone inside who cannot be allowed to escape."

"Then, sir, I'll have all my troops look for them. Please head outside."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

Lihaku resisted the impulse to frown, glad he was looking down toward the ground. It would not be good for Lihaku if Jinshi was injured. He wanted nothing more than to get the young man out of there, to where he could watch the operation from somewhere safe.

At the same time, though, this was the Forbidden Army, and that meant that Jinshi's place was at its head. The fact that they were essentially launching an ambush seemed to make him even less interested in relinquishing his position.

To stand proudly at the front of this force was to throw away his identity as the eunuch Jinshi—and that would shatter the balance that had reigned at court. The Shi clan, which had been one part of that balance, was already in shambles; Lihaku could see it himself. Members of the family might be hiding amongst the captured enemy soldiers. And capturing them was all well and good, but their guilt was already clear. Those who conspired against the

Emperor could expect the extermination of their entire families at best. The sovereign's personal mercy might temper the outcome to some extent, but the Shi clan had little hope to cling to.

"Grand Commandant Kan's daughter is a prisoner here," Jinshi said.

"Sir..."

Kan was a very, very common name. But only one official in the land bore it: the eccentric strategist. Before the mission, Lihaku had been informed about her—first, that she existed (one more surprise on a day full of them), and second, that no one knew why she had been abducted.

"Can you abandon her?" Jinshi asked.

He could not. That much, at least, was certain.

"It would make me a new political enemy..." Lihaku said without meaning to.

For a second, he thought he saw something mingle with Jinshi's hard expression. "Yes, I believe you're right." He looked agonized, as if he was going to be torn apart—but he moved forward.

Lihaku stood up, pulling at his hair. But the only thing he could do under the circumstances was to complete his assigned task as quickly as possible.

○●○

Along with the blast there came a great rush of snow. She knew intellectually that this was called an avalanche. But it was like a snow dragon descending upon them from the cliff at their backs. It didn't reach Maomao, but a building she took to be some kind of storehouse was obscured by a haze of white.

She observed all this from the balcony. The explosions had scared off most of the workers from the basement, and the few remaining were attempting to fight the fires. They would have to split their efforts once again to deal with the avalanche. She saw soldiers come leaping over the outer wall and stare in amazement at the scene before them.

Then there were those who couldn't escape. Something white came flashing over the now thinly defended walls; the color blended in and she couldn't see very well at this distance what it was. But she saw some panicked soldiers confront it, and then a flash of red erupting through the night.

Blood landing on the pure, white snow.

The white thing was an intruder. He cast aside his white cloak to reveal a full set of armor.

Come to bring the rebels to heel?

For an upper consort to flee the rear palace was as good as rebellion. And with her family making their stand in a fortress like this—well, there would be no excuses.

Am I safe here? Maomao wondered. She stopped when she saw the invaders in the distant light of their torches. She wasn't sure how she knew, but she knew: she was sure she had seen him. A man whose nymph-like beauty hardly seemed fit for a battlefield. Clothed in armor of an expensive color, he cut a dashing figure, like a real soldier.

Could he possibly be here to rescue her?

No way. Even he doesn't have that kind of time to kill.

Her eyes must have deceived her. Anyway, the form soon vanished as the invading forces continued to flood into the stronghold. They would be here soon, and Maomao had no idea how they would treat her.

The smell of sulfur was everywhere—from the explosion? She pressed the sleeve of her robe to her mouth so that it wouldn't poison her.

I really should just run...

One thing was for sure: she wouldn't have a leg to stand on when it came to criticizing Shisui after this.

What was she, some kind of idiot? She *must* be an idiot, she thought as she stopped in place.

She could hear footsteps coming closer. Her heart was pounding. They wouldn't finish her off right then and there... Would they?

Whoever it is, I hope they'll at least hear me out.

At that moment, someone kicked down the door. A soldier wearing bluish-purple armor stood in the entryway.

He didn't say anything. She didn't say anything. Neither of them said anything. After a long moment, it was Maomao who spoke first: "I'm sorry, but might I ask you to protect me, Master Jinshi?"

"Are you hurt?" the soldier—Jinshi—asked. He could see the blood on Maomao's clothes.

"I'm all right. It's just spatter."

"That's not all right!"

“It’s snake blood.”

Jinshi didn’t look like he thought this was any better, but Maomao found his exasperated expression oddly reassuring. It was so familiar. She felt the corners of her own mouth softening into a smile.

“Hey, is that—” Jinshi stepped closer and was about to say something, but they were interrupted by another set of approaching footsteps, and his expression changed abruptly. The look on his face was neither that of the eunuch with his delicate, nymph-like smile, nor the somehow childish young man.

“Milord heir,” a rough-looking man said as he entered the room.

Heir?

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“That title no longer belongs to me,” Jinshi said. “A royal son has been born.”

So Consort Gyokuyou had safely delivered her child—and it was a boy.

So that’s who he really is, Maomao thought. For a man who wasn’t a eunuch to enter the rear palace was a serious crime. Only those who shared blood with the Emperor, or who had his specific orders, could do so.

“You seem to have aged a good deal, Master Jinshi.” She spoke rather softly, yet he glanced in her direction with what she took to be annoyance.

“Is Lihaku here?” Jinshi asked the soldier. The big, doglike man soon bounded into the room. “I’m leaving this in your hands,” Jinshi said, and then he left.

Lihaku tilted his head, crossed his arms, and furrowed his brow. “Forgive me, but you look an awful lot like a young lady named Maomao who works in the palace.”

“That would be because I am.”

Lihaku might be making silly remarks, but instead of his usual robe of military office he was dressed in proper armor and carried a club.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I seem to have been kidnapped.”

The angle of the tilt of Lihaku’s head increased further, until it was practically horizontal. “Say, your, uh, dad...”

“...is probably exactly who you’re thinking, so please, don’t say his name. Just call him ‘the old fart’ or something; I’ll know what you mean.”

Bowing to Maomao’s wishes, Lihaku didn’t go on, but he did tremble visibly, after which he smacked his fist into his palm as if everything made sense. Maomao didn’t know exactly which dots he thought he was connecting, but she wasn’t sure she liked it.

Lihaku pointed to Maomao and said, “Her! It’s her!” A subordinate of his gave him a dubious look, but pulled a whistle out of the folds of his robe and blew on it. Lihaku said to Maomao, “Hey, I’m sorry about that. If you say so, I’m sure it’s true. Boy, you look a fright, though! You’re covered in blood. You hurt?”

“It’s spatter.”

Lihaku was as rude as ever, but he looked at her with genuine concern. The worst of Maomao’s injuries consisted of a scar where Shenmei had hit her with her fan. The soldier—whom Maomao couldn’t really bring herself to

dislike despite his manner—must have gotten some blood on himself too, for when she got near him, she smelled iron.

"Well, *please* don't be hurt," Lihaku said. "The old fart insisted on coming along even though he can barely move, and wouldn't you know it...now he can't move."

The old fart. He'd said it. He'd actually said it. The fart was probably the one who had dreamed up this whole ambush, Maomao thought. Probably found some way to start the avalanche too.

Lihaku didn't look too worried, but that didn't mean he wasn't taking his job seriously. "What's this? Sleeping children?"

He clomped over, but Maomao threw out her hands to block his way. "They aren't breathing. They were given poison."

Lihaku grimaced, probably registering what a terrible thing he was seeing. But if the kids had survived, the only thing waiting for them would have been the gallows. Even an attempt on the life of a single high consort could lead to the conspirator being hanged and their family's assets being confiscated—if not worse. And the crime afoot here was far, far more grave. Everyone could expect to be punished, including women and children.

Maomao studied Lihaku's agonized expression. "What happens to those who are executed?" she ventured. "Are they simply abandoned?"

"No, no. They're laid to rest in a special cemetery. But they'll be cremated."

"Can't they at least be buried with their mothers?"

Lihaku gave her an inarticulate look, but scratched his head and groaned painfully. "I'm afraid I don't really know. That stuff isn't my job." Nonetheless, Lihaku approached and took one of the children in his arms. He took the covers and tore them in two, wrapping the child with them as if in swaddling clothes. "It's almost like they're just asleep. Thought maybe I could carry all of them at once, but this kid's pretty heavy."

He wrapped the next child in the remainder of the torn covers. Then he tore the sheets as well and continued swaddling children. Just as they were thinking there wouldn't be enough to carry the last child, the soldier standing guard at the door took off his cloak and brought it over.

"Somebody call a couple more men," Lihaku commanded, and then he hefted one child in each arm.

"Master Lihaku?"

“We can’t bury them together, but I’d feel a little sick just leaving them here. We could at least bury them somewhere close to the graveyard. Quietly.” He smiled, showing white teeth.

“You don’t think you’d be charged with a crime for that?”

“Don’t know. If I am, you’ll just have to figure out a way to save my skin.”

“Yes, I’m sure it’ll be just that easy.” Maomao folded her arms, somewhat annoyed, but then Lihaku looked as if he’d had a flash of inspiration.

“That’s it! That’s a great idea!” he said, grinning.

“What is, sir?”

“If you called the old fart ‘Daddy,’ he’d do anything you asked, right?”

We need hardly say how Maomao responded to *that* suggestion.

“Uh... Sorry, pretend I never said anything,” Lihaku said, averting his eyes. Apparently her face had been just that terrible.

Chapter 21: How it Began

There was a piercing whistle. Jinshi felt his anxiety ease a little bit. The whistle was the signal that the mission had been carried out: several short tweets if there was a problem, one long one if all was well. Lihaku must have gotten Maomao safely out of the fortress.

Jinshi emerged from a long hallway. He thought back to the blueprints he'd studied on the way here: ahead of him there should be a large, open room, an office, and then the living chambers.

Basen was right behind Jinshi. Normally, this would have been Gaoshun's place, but Gaoshun had his own job to do. But Basen had a habit of getting a bit out of sorts when standing in for his father.

"Don't get too tense," Jinshi advised him, speaking softly so that only Basen would hear. Two other officers followed them.

"Allow me to go in front, then," Basen said. Jinshi understood what he meant—he wanted Jinshi to be protected both ahead and behind. Jinshi chuckled, then went to push open a heavy door, but he was suddenly seized by a bad feeling. He told the others to step back, to not stand in front of the door. Then he pushed it open and immediately flattened himself against the wall.

An almost deafening roar passed by him.

"What was that?!" Basen demanded, scowling.

"Nothing I didn't expect."

If they were producing fire powder here, one could at least assume they would use feifa in the fighting. There were constraints on where such weapons could be used—they were vulnerable to inclement weather, and even when in good working order, feifa took time to reload. And one needed at least as much space as there was here in this stronghold.

It was just as Jinshi had predicted—in the large room beyond the door, some men were frantically trying to reload their guns. "Let's go!" Jinshi shouted. At the same moment, the men in the room tried to abandon their guns and draw their swords, but it was too late.

Feifa were fundamentally intended to be used with several people switching off firing. These men had missed with their first volley, and there was no time to reload fresh bullets. There were about five of them, all dressed in gorgeous clothing. Jinshi recognized several faces. The distinctive smell of fire powder suffused the large, flagstone-floored chamber.

"Where is Shishou?" he asked. He assumed everyone in this room was a member of the Shi clan. Their soldiers had abandoned them when they saw it was a losing battle; the feifa were a last-ditch attempt to turn the tide. "Not feeling talkative?"

"W-We don't know! This was never our plan!" one of the men blurted, his eyes fixed on Jinshi. He was shouting so excitedly that spittle flew from his mouth. Basen quickly moved to restrain him, afraid that he might throw himself at Jinshi. "We were tricked! We were just dupes!" the man cried from where Basen pressed him to the floor.

"You brazen—!" Basen, enraged, shoved the man's face even harder into the ground. "We have proof, *proof*, that you scoundrels embezzled national funds to rebuild this fortress! And you stood here with weapons drawn against us—even if that were your only crime, you know what it would entail!" Basen pressed the blade of his naked sword against the man's neck. The man, now practically frothing, looked utterly desperate.

"I s-swear, we didn't know! I didn't know! He said this was for the country's benefit. We did it all for our nation..."

Whoosh. The sword fell—and sparks flew as it struck against the stone floor. The man, his eyes practically popping out of his head, ceased his jabbering. A dark stain spread across the floor underneath him. The other men stayed silent, perhaps not wishing to be put in the same ignominious situation, but the fear in their eyes was complete.

Jinshi wished he could tell them not to look at him like that—but how could he? They could beg him for mercy with their eyes, but the judgment upon them was irrevocable. All that Jinshi could do for them now was to stand firm and let the speartips of their emotions lodge in him.

"Do be kind. The sword now or the scaffold later. Surely you could have the decency to simply end it for him."

Basen and the other soldiers took up fighting stances as a voice approached, accompanied by noisy footsteps. A portly man shuffled slowly into the room: Shishou. He held a feifa in his hand.

Jinshi looked at the man known as the old tanuki. “You seem quite relaxed, Shishou.” He produced a scroll from the folds of his robes. Sealed with the Emperor’s personal insignia, it instructed him to apprehend the entire Shi clan.

Still moving slowly, as though he had all the time in the world, Shishou leveled his gun.

“Have you taken leave of your senses?” one of the soldiers asked in a quiet voice. Shishou carried no flint, and the man seemed to assume that that meant he couldn’t fire the gun.

Jinshi, though, grabbed Basen with one hand and another of his subordinates with the other and pulled them both down onto the ground. The explosion came next. The bullet bounced off the wall and hit the Shi man on the ground in the leg. A most unfortunate fellow. His scream echoed around the room.

“Oh, you’re embarrassing yourself. Didn’t you shoot an animal with this thing, just to see how it felt?” Shishou said to the screaming man. “And I was so eager to try it out on a real human. Truly, a shame.”

Jinshi registered the complete lack of emotion in Shishou’s voice, as if he were reading from a script. Or was Jinshi simply imagining things?

“Hmm. It looks like this is the end. What I wouldn’t have given for a little more time...” Then Shishou cast the feifa aside. He looked at Jinshi, and for just an instant, his face softened. What was he trying to say?

Jinshi never had the chance to ask him. Maybe Shishou wouldn’t have told him, even if he had.

“Go!” Basen shouted, still on the floor.

Blood flew.

Three swords lodged almost simultaneously in Shishou’s plump belly. He didn’t even cry out, just looked upward. A red froth foamed around his mouth, and his eyes were bloodshot. Yet he didn’t collapse, but only gazed at the ceiling, his arms spread wide. Was that laughter, or was he cursing?

There was nothing special on the ceiling. Perhaps he was looking through it, to something higher still. Jinshi didn’t understand; he felt like he was watching a performance, as if this place was Shishou’s theater and this moment was his stage.

Without ever revealing what it was above him that so fascinated him, Shishou expired. Anticlimactic, perhaps. But he was gone.

Beyond the great room was a hallway full of thinly clothed women and outrageous men. The women were babbling ceaselessly, eager to tell him who was within in exchange for their lives. The men kept insisting that they weren't members of the Shi clan, unlike the women. Jinshi understood the impulse to save one's own life, but he couldn't bear the spectacle of everyone selling out everyone else to save themselves. He left it to his subordinates to apprehend the lot of them.

The former consort Loulan and her mother Shenmei were in the innermost room, he had been told. But when they arrived, Basen, who entered first, exclaimed, "There's no one here!"

All they found was a large bed in the middle of the room and some couches. There was clothing everywhere, along with scattered wine and pipes, and some sort of clinging aroma. It was easy enough to guess what they had been up to in here. Basen's face was red, but not from anger.

Jinshi, in something of a daze, tossed aside the incense burner. Some kind of dried herbs spilled out. If the apothecary girl were here, she would know what they were, what effect they had.

"Where did they go?" There was no one on the balcony in the next room either. "Did they jump down?"

As they surveyed the balcony, Jinshi puzzled. The room they had passed through and the one they were in now were supposed to be about the same size according to the blueprints—but something seemed off. The second room felt smaller. He went back and forth between the two rooms. There was only one door into the innermost room, and on the far side was the balcony. The relative lack of furniture made it feel more spacious, but the distance from the wall to the balcony was noticeably less than the dimensions of the other room.

He went back again, and this time he inspected a chest of drawers by the wall. It exactly matched the missing dimension of the other room.

Silently, he opened the chest. He reached in, past a panoply of gaudy clothing. Despite the chest's seemingly solid construction, the backboard felt oddly thin. He found that with just a gentle push, it raised up.

He leaned into the chest, getting down on all fours to peer inside. Where he would have expected a wall, there was an open space. A secret tunnel. And he could see a dim light.

“Bang!” a voice said playfully. Jinshi discovered the muzzle of a gun held right up to his face. Loulan was there, in the tunnel, and she was holding some sort of firearm far more complex than the feifa Jinshi knew. It was like the one Shishou had fired earlier, but smaller, more portable; it could fit even in a cramped space like this. He was shocked to realize they hadn’t just been producing fire powder here, but also the newest firearms.

“Allow me to call you Master Jinshi. For convenience,” Loulan said, still holding the gun on him. She was covered in soot, and her hair was scorched. The candle in the candleholder she carried flickered each time she spoke. “Would you be so kind as to come with me?”

“What if I refuse?”

“If I was willing to let you do that, I wouldn’t be threatening you.”

Jinshi was almost impressed by her audacity. He looked at the current-model feifa, taking in all the things about it that were new and different. He raised his hands. “Understood.”

And with that, he followed Loulan into the tunnel.

The blueprints Jinshi had studied hadn’t shown any secret tunnels. Maybe that would have defeated the purpose of making them secret. Or perhaps Shishou had added this passage only recently.

The tunnel was narrow, and Loulan walked backward so she could keep the gun on Jinshi. It might have been easier with Jinshi walking in front and Loulan holding the gun at his back, but she was probably wary of the possibility that he would attempt to take the weapon from her as he went to walk in front of her.

“I’m a little surprised you’re just coming with me,” Loulan said.

“And yet you’re the one who told me to,” he replied, almost nonchalantly. Loulan giggled. Strangely, he found that she seemed much more *human* than she had in the rear palace.

“Surely it would be easy enough for you to take this from me?”

Yes—Jinshi couldn’t be certain, but he suspected he would be more than able to overpower her. But he didn’t say that, just remained silent.

There must not have been much air in the tunnel, for the candle kept flickering. Just before it guttered out, though, they arrived at a secret room. The candle flame regained its strength—some opening must have been letting in air—and its light illuminated two other women. One was a young lady

who looked much like Loulan, although there was a dark bruise on her face.

"Oh, Suirei, my dear sister. She hasn't done anything awful to you already, has she?"

The other woman shook her head in short, staccato twitches. Suirei—that was the name of the palace woman who had come back from the dead. And this was the face of the eunuch who had entered the rear palace not long ago.

Then Jinshi looked at the third woman in the room, middle-aged and wearing what struck him as outrageous clothing and makeup, without any sense of the dignity that was appropriate to her age. It reminded him of how Loulan had been back in the rear palace.

The only furniture in the room was two chairs and a single desk.

"Loulan," the middle-aged woman began, "is this man..."

"Yes, Mother. I brought him here to make your wish come true."

Loulan's mother, Shenmei, glowered at Jinshi with undisguised fury.

But Loulan went on: "I know how much you've always hated him. His appearance. Is it because of who he reminds you of? Or simply because you've always been jealous of him, always resented how much more beautiful he is than you?"

"Loulan!" Shenmei snapped at her daughter. Loulan, though, didn't so much as flinch—instead, Suirei trembled. She seemed so much different than Jinshi had been told.

"I'm sorry. That was going too far for a joke, I suppose. Then allow me to put on a little performance for you. A warm-up before the main event."

Then she set down the candle, tucked the feifa into her sash, and calmly, clearly, began to tell a story.

Loulan's story took place during the time of the previous emperor.

The imbecilic ruler had been his mother's puppet when it came to conducting politics. (This was an awfully disrespectful way to talk about the former emperor; what kept Jinshi from getting mad about it was the knowledge that it was all too true.)

Jinshi had never thought that the man he called Father was frightening. But the woman who stood behind him, the empress regnant—*she* was terrifying.

Jinshi chased a wisp of an old memory. What the end of the empress regnant's life had been like, he didn't really know. All he remembered was

that the former emperor had passed on quickly, as if hurrying to follow his mother into the next life.

Ever more impatient with her son's lack of interest in grown women, the empress regnant had larded the rear palace with the most beautiful ladies. And then she had instructed the chieftain of one of the northern families to offer his daughter, who was to be set up—at least outwardly—as one of the ruler's high consorts.

"What are you saying, Loulan?" Shenmei asked, puzzled by her daughter's tale. The story wasn't going quite the way *she* knew it.

Loulan covered her mouth with her sleeve and giggled. "Is this the first time you've heard this story, Mother? My grandfather mumbled it like a mantra on his deathbed as he wasted away from illness."

There was nothing new in the idea of nominally making a high official's daughter a consort in order to effectively hold her hostage. It had happened throughout history.

"Do you know why the rear palace got so large?" Loulan asked Jinshi.

"I've heard it was at the instigation of *your* father, whispering in the ear of the empress regnant."

That was the general view within the court: that Shishou had wormed his way into the notoriously cagey empress regnant's inner circle. Shishou had originally been nothing more than the unremarkable son of a branch of the Shi family, but by dint of his own cleverness and the blood in his veins, he had gotten himself adopted by the main house, which lacked an heir, and been given the name Shishou.

The main house: that was Shenmei's family. She had been betrothed to Shishou since before she had been gifted to him by the emperor.

"That's right," Loulan said. "I believe he suggested the expansion of the rear palace as a new public works program."

A nice way of putting it, Jinshi thought. A way of sidestepping the issue any time the question of the diminishing size of the rear palace came up.

"He proposed it in connection with the slave trade."

That caused Jinshi's eyes to widen. Shenmei looked as surprised as he did. Suirei, meanwhile, remained expressionless.

Loulan giggled at Jinshi. Then she looked at Shenmei. "You really didn't know any of this, did you, Mother? You don't know what Grandfather did to draw the empress regnant's ire. Why he had to offer his daughter to the rear

palace to keep him in line."

Slavery had been alive and well at that time; the palace had even been staffed by enslaved eunuchs. But Loulan had referred to the slave *trade*.

Li's system of government-sanctioned slavery operated on similar principles to its brothels: when a person had worked long enough to repay their purchase price, or fulfilled a set term of service, they could be considered emancipated. But that held true only within the nation's borders. The export of slaves to other countries was supposed to be forbidden, and yet...

"It seems slaves are quite a profitable commodity. Forbidden or not, there's no end of people eager to get their hands in that particular till. At the time, it seems young ladies brought an especially high price."

With one of its most prominent daughters now held hostage, the Shi clan had been forced to scale down its slave-trading operation. The trade didn't disappear entirely, however, and what remained was said to center around the rear palace. It involved not just young women, but often men, who were frequently castrated before they were sold off as slaves.

This had been Shishou's suggestion: use the rear palace to shelter the women who would otherwise have been sold abroad. His thinking matched up neatly with that of the empress regnant, who saw his proposal as a way to kill two birds with one stone—politically, and with respect to her son.

Parents felt guilty having to sell off their daughters, and given the choice, they would rather see them serve in the rear palace than be carted off as slaves. Two years of service would also be likely to leave them with some skills or education that would lessen the chance that they would fall into slavery afterward. Above all, serving in the rear palace was a distinguished qualification in its own right. Unfortunately, with the dramatic expansion of the rear palace, the plans for education and so on had come to little.

"But of course, the empress regnant had more than one iron in the fire—and so did my father."

By gaining the empress regnant's trust, he hoped to repair the reputation of the Shi clan. And if that proved impossible...

"I know things have been hard for you, Mother. If this was where it was going to end, then I wish you had run away before it all started. After Father went to all that trouble to give you the chance."

Was she referring to the secret passage out of the rear palace? Was that

what it had been for? Jinshi wondered.

Shenmei's face was like a storm.

"Was it that you couldn't trust a man who said he would throw away his position to leave with you?"

"Loulan, you little..." Deep creases formed on Shenmei's face as she looked at her daughter, yet it was not Loulan but Suirei who looked intimidated. Shenmei seemed to notice this; she turned a look on Suirei as if glaring at some filth on the ground. "Of course I didn't trust him. How could I? My father's body was hardly cold before *he* took over headship of the family and married the mother of *this* wench!"

Suirei was watching Shenmei, still shivering.

Loulan giggled again and went over to Suirei. She took the hand of this sister from a different mother, placing her other hand at Suirei's collar and tugging at something that dangled around her neck. Something very similar to Jinshi's own silver hair stick hung from a string. But where Jinshi's depicted a qilin, Suirei's was in the shape of a bird. Those who recognized it would have known it was a phoenix. Like the qilin, only a select few were entitled to wear that symbol.

"I guess His Former Majesty must have felt guilty. Worried about the baby he'd expelled from the rear palace. Because it seems he visited her rather frequently, by Father's good offices."

It was Shishou who had secretly sheltered the doctor and child who had been banished from the rear palace. In time, the child had grown up; Shishou took over headship of his family, and the young woman had reached an age to be married.

"The emperor had denied his daughter once, but in time he must have come to terms with the fact that she was his. Because do you know what he said to Father?"

Would you be so kind as to take my daughter as your wife?

Shishou, trusted by the empress regnant and almost like family to the former emperor himself, must have seemed an ideal son-in-law to the sovereign. The former emperor vowed to grant any wish Shishou might have —how then could he refuse?

So the former head of the Shi clan, who had attracted such scrutiny from the empress regnant, died on his sickbed, and leadership passed to Shishou, whom the empress regnant trusted. There was no more need to keep Shenmei

as a hostage. It was the emperor who had ultimate discretion as to what happened to the flowers of the rear palace. Shishou had married the sovereign's daughter, and a child had been born to them. They named her Shisui, granting her the clan name, Shi. This was the woman now known as Suirei.

"And thus you, Mother, were graciously bestowed upon Father."

The former emperor was a fool of a man, and had completely failed to understand the effect this choice would have on his daughter. Suirei's mother died of "illness" soon after, and Suirei was taken in by the former rear-palace physician. That man would later be hired and brought to this very fortress to create an elixir of immortality—but that's another story.

About the same time the doctor took Suirei in, the former emperor took to secreting himself away in his room, and for the more than ten years from then until he died, there was no word from him. Left with only a single piece of silver jewelry, the girl now known as Suirei never learned that she was the former emperor's granddaughter, and after Loulan was born, she was treated as no better than the child of a concubine. Even her name was taken from her and given to her newborn little sister.

"You— You're lying. That's enough mindless drivel from you!" Shenmei, faced with the truth, backed away.

The story must have been shocking for Suirei as well, but she appeared virtually unmoved. Only, she kept looking uneasily at Shenmei. Perhaps Suirei *had* known all along.

Loulan, still smiling, approached Shenmei. "Drivel, Mother? And after Father labored the rest of his life for you. Knowing all the while that it could only end in destruction. You don't even know why Master Jinshi is here, do you?" She looked at her mother contemptuously, then turned to Jinshi. "Tell us about the end of my father's life."

"He died...laughing," Jinshi said. He didn't know what the laughter had signified, as he didn't know anything Shishou might have been thinking. Having heard Loulan's story, though, he started to think he could sense a different perspective. He even began to wonder if he had been looking at the Shi clan's rebellion the wrong way all along.

"That man... Power was all he ever wanted. I'm sure the only reason he even married me was so he could lay claim to the family headship." Shenmei's face contorted.

Loulan, though, smiled again. “And yet, within the clan, it was you who held sway, was it not, Mother? Do you understand what kind of people they were, the family members who worked so hard to flatter you?”

They were fools, taking bribes and embezzling money, but they sucked up to Shenmei, knowing that if they had her favor, Shishou, the nominal head of the clan, would say nothing. He was just an adopted son, after all, a little boy who’d stumbled into the family; as much influence as he might wield at court, within the clan his power was minimal. Shenmei systematically chased out anyone who said things she didn’t like—until finally, there was nothing to check the rot. And this was the source of a pernicious misunderstanding.

What had been the motivation behind the expansion of the rear palace on the one hand and the embezzlement from the national treasury on the other? The two should be viewed separately, not as all the doing of the Shi clan.

Loulan looked at Jinshi and smiled, for she could see that he grasped what she was trying to say.

The slave trade had been abolished on the accession of the current Emperor—yes, it continued underground, but it was the groundwork laid by Shishou and the empress regnant that had allowed the system to be ended more or less easily. Now Jinshi was looking for something to conceivably replace it as the rear palace shrank again—and even in this case, the Shi clan had managed to interfere.

“Everyone always called my father a tanuki, but they forget that tanuki are cowardly creatures. It’s because they know they’re secretly so small and weak that they try so hard to trick everybody.”

With that, Jinshi understood. He knew why Shishou had died laughing: because the cowardly tanuki had succeeded in deceiving everybody right to the very end.

“Did Father play his part properly? Was he the villain he needed to be?” Loulan asked, a smile flitting across her face.

Jinshi at last understood what Shishou had been aiming for. He sought to become the necessary evil, bringing all the country’s corruption together in one place. A role that could never be rewarded, for which he would never be celebrated.

Jinshi clenched his fist so hard that his fingernails bit into his palm, drawing blood. “Do you have any proof that any of this is true?”

“Was the corruption consuming the court from within largely eliminated,

or wasn't it?"

"How could you know your plan would work?"

"If it didn't, we could always simply fall back on a coup d'état. If a nation is weak enough to be dragged along by corruption like that, then better that it not exist." Loulan sounded almost offhanded.

"You... You were plotting this all along?!" Shenmei demanded, her voice trembling. "You and *him*—you've been deceiving me this entire time?!"

"Deceiving you? I did exactly what you said, Mother. Didn't you say this nation deserved to go to dust? Then you chased out every fellow clan member who didn't march to your tune, and surrounded yourself with sycophants who hung on your every word. Did you really think that a rabble like that could defeat the country's own army?"

Shenmei looked furious at her daughter's hard words. Finally, she jumped at Loulan, her nail caps leaving two long, red streaks down the side of her daughter's cheek.

"Is that not what *these* are for?" Shenmei demanded. She had grabbed the feifa.

"That's more than you can handle, Mother. Give it back, please."

"Be quiet!"

But Loulan only chuckled mockingly.

"What's so funny?" Shenmei snapped.

"Mother... You sound like a two-bit thug."

Shenmei's face twisted horribly, and she fired the gun. Jinshi threw himself to the ground. Something went flying past him, accompanied by the earsplitting roar.

"I'm such a bad daughter. If I really wanted the same thing as Father, I could never have done this."

Loulan's face was streaked with blood. Across from her, though, Shenmei was absolutely covered in it. In her hand was what remained of the exploded feifa.

"These new feifa are very complicated. That one was a prototype." She'd only brought it along in order to intimidate Jinshi. It might simply have had stuffing inside it. "Didn't it ever occur to you to take it from me, Master Jinshi? Surely there would have been any number of chances, if you'd been looking for them."

"I assumed you had something you wanted to tell me."

“Hee hee! If only your pretty head were as empty as it looks.” Laughing (and still being rather rude), Loulan plucked the feifa out of Shenmei’s blood-soaked hand and threw it away. Then she gently laid her mother down, holding her shaking hand. “Father is dead. You could at least shed a tear for him. He was waiting for you all his life. If you had cried...I wouldn’t have said what I did.”

Until the former emperor had made his request, Shishou had remained completely chaste, not taking so much as a single concubine. It was the sort of purity that could only have been mustered by a man whose heart still beat solely for the woman to whom he had been betrothed when he was young.

Shenmei didn’t speak—she couldn’t. Flying shards of metal had ravaged her face in the blast. No shadow of her former beauty remained, just a red mess.

Suirei observed all this with trembling.

“There must have been another way,” Jinshi said, getting to his feet.

“Maybe,” Loulan replied. “But it’s hard to give everyone what they want. We aren’t wise enough for that.”

Shenmei was simply mean-spirited. She’d wanted to destroy the country that had made such a fool of her. Shishou; everything he had done had been for Shenmei’s sake. Even if it had backfired on him, he had done it all out of his feelings for her. Yet at the same time, he was a loyal retainer unable to abandon his country. And thus he had spent decades upon decades playing the villain, all the way to the end.

Jinshi couldn’t tell what Suirei was thinking. For her, had this been about appeasing the spirits of her mother and grandmother? And did she look somehow relieved as her empty gaze settled upon Shenmei, gasping for breath? Or was that simply Jinshi’s imagination?

As for Loulan...

“I know I’m in no position to make demands, but perhaps I could request two favors of you?” she said.

“What are they?”

“Thank you,” she said first, bowing deeply. She knew she had no reason to expect that Jinshi would listen to her. Then she produced a piece of paper from the folds of her robe and handed it to him. He caught his breath when he saw what was written on it, for what it said was unimaginable.

“Truthfully, I was hoping to use this to bargain for my life. But I don’t

think it would get me very far now. That paper reveals what's going to happen to this country. If the Shi clan still existed when it did, they might have compounded the situation and destroyed the nation."

Written on the piece of paper was a prediction of something far worse than this rebellion.

Loulan's fingers brushed her mother's skin. Shenmei's breath was rapidly fading.

"Any members of our clan with any sense abandoned the Shi name long ago. And my older sister is the same. They've already died once...so perhaps I could ask you to overlook them."

There was a beat. "I'll do what I can," Jinshi said.

"You'll let the 'dead' lie, then?" Loulan repeated, seeking confirmation. "I appreciate it."

Suirei, as someone with a connection to the former emperor, could not be wholly ignored.

"Thank you very much." Loulan bowed her head again and took Shenmei's hand. The deformed nail caps were still clinging to it, just barely. Loulan stuck them on her own fingertips.

At the same moment, Jinshi thought he sensed someone. Basen and the others had finally realized he was missing, and had eventually succeeded in finding the hidden passageway. Did Loulan realize they were coming?

"My second wish, then." She reached out toward Jinshi, stretching toward him with the hand decorated with the long nail caps. She seemed like she was moving so slowly. He could easily have dodged her, had he wished to. And yet Jinshi didn't move, but accepted it.

The terrible nail cap bit into his cheek, tearing skin and flesh. A few drops of blood flew into his eye; he squeezed it shut, but with his open eye, he looked at Loulan.

"Thank you very much," she repeated, and bowed for the third time. She had done what her mother, unable to escape death, had not had a chance to do, and scarred the face Shenmei had reviled so much. It might seem a pointless act now, but it sealed Loulan's fate.

"I wonder if I could be an even better actor than Father," she quipped, and then she turned to look at Shenmei. "Dear Mother, I've done everything I can do." Still smiling, she opened the door across from them, revealing blowing snow. They were on the roof of the fortress. Loulan twirled out the door,

sleeves waving, black hair flying; the dancing flakes surrounded her.

Basen and the others were in the narrow passageway, looking for their moment. Basen, his eyes full of fury, leapt forward, hardly understanding what had happened. When Loulan was sure he was in the room, she raised her long-nailed fingers high. Even in the faint moonlight, you could see the blood on them. Loulan, blood streaks on her face, almost appeared to float above the snow. And behind her was Jinshi with a fresh wound on his cheek.

Suddenly Loulan laughed, loud and long. "Ahhh ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" Her voice rebounded off the snow. She sounded wild—but in her eyes, at least, you could see that she was still sane.

The faces of Basen and his companions turned to sheer fury.

The light had gone out of Shenmei's eyes. One could think only that she reaped what she had sown.

Suirei, still trembling, stretched out her hand—but she couldn't reach Loulan.

Jinshi could do nothing but witness Loulan's last moments, clutching the piece of paper she had given him.

In the snow, her sleeves flapped and her hair whipped. Her laughter was suddenly accompanied by the crack of gunshots. Loulan danced along even as the bullets brushed past her sleeves and grazed her cheek. Finally, Jinshi was sure: this was her stage. And all those around her were merely supporting actors drawn into her performance.

The rear palace was a stage, and the country itself, and perhaps she saw her role as the villainess who would overturn them. If her father Shishou had been a tanuki, then maybe Loulan was a fox. After all, in the stories, the villainess who proved a country's undoing always turned out to be a vixen.

Loulan continued to dance lightly along. How could she move so delicately among such deep snow? The soldiers, brought up short, were more occupied with firing their feifa than with chasing after her.

Should he have stopped her?

No, he couldn't.

He couldn't mar the performance of the great villainess of her time. Couldn't even take his eyes off it.

Another shot—how many was that?

There was a thump, and Loulan stopped moving. The unmistakable, nose-prickling smell of fire powder drifted through the air.

The bullet had hit Loulan in the chest. She reeled backward, pain spreading over her face.

"Arrest her!" Basen shouted to his men. To Jinshi, the idea seemed repugnant. It wasn't the wrong thing to do. But he felt like someone had told him the end of a story he'd been enjoying before he got to it.

The smile returned to Loulan's twisted face. Then it vanished again...

No, it only seemed to vanish. She had tumbled backward, and there was nothing behind her. Except the fall from the roof.

That was the last he saw of Loulan.

His body felt impossibly heavy, like all the fatigue of the past several days had finally caught up with him.

The moment they'd gotten out of the stronghold, they'd linked up with a reserve unit and he'd received first aid, with someone stitching up his cheek. He was the one getting the stitches, so why did everyone else look like they were in such pain from it? Was it because he had gone without anesthetic?

They finally saw Gaoshun again as well, who promptly told Jinshi to get some sleep. Of course Gaoshun was there—the story was that Jinshi had been with the rear unit all along, so Gaoshun had to be seen there.

Truth be told, it was only just now that Jinshi was realizing he really hadn't slept for the past several days.

"How's the girl?"

"She's fine—so go sleep."

Did he really look so tired? Maybe he did, but he couldn't bring himself to rest. Gaoshun, clearly sick of Jinshi's intransigence, pointed at a carriage. "I'd recommend keeping your distance."

Jinshi promptly ignored him and entered the vehicle. There he discovered a diminutive young woman, soot-stained and blood-stippled, lying asleep on top of several blankets. She was curled up like an infant, making her look even smaller than she usually did. She was surrounded by a collection of objects wrapped in white cloths.

"The dead children of the Shi clan," Gaoshun explained.

"Why is she sleeping with *them*?"

"You know it's impossible to talk her out of something when she gets an idea in her head."

He was right; this young woman, Maomao, had a distinct stubborn streak.

Was there some reason she wanted to be there?

"She looks awful."

"Speak for yourself, sir," Gaoshun said, grimacing. It pained Jinshi to remember the sight of Gaoshun beating Basen after they had returned. Jinshi had been injured, yes, and he knew that a soldier who failed in his duty must be punished—but it was only because Jinshi had acceded to the wish of that vanished vixen.

"Forget about me," he said brusquely. "In any event, you made the right choice not to let the strategist see her." From what Jinshi heard, the man had not made a very graceful landing on leaping out of the carriage and had injured his back. He couldn't take a step on his own.

Jinshi climbed into the carriage. "Wait outside." Gaoshun nodded slowly.

Jinshi gazed at Maomao's face. There was blood on it, and her left ear was swollen, although it had been smeared with ointment. None of this would have happened to Maomao if she had never gotten involved with him. The thought made his heart ache.

Other than her ear, she had no injuries to speak of, but he could see a dark bruise on her neck. Had someone hit her? And the blood, it must have come from somewhere.

Slowly, Jinshi reached out his hand. And then...

"Excuse me, Master Jinshi, but may I ask what you're doing?" Maomao looked at him just like someone trying to drive away a nasty little housefly.

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Chapter 22: In the Clutches of the Fox

When Maomao opened her eyes, she found a lovely nobleman in front of her. For some reason, he was leaning over her and reaching toward her collar.

She gave Jinshi a glare, causing him to exclaim, “W-Well, I—,” stumbling over his words and waving his hands as if to protest his innocence.

Normally, she might have held the glare a little longer, but she couldn’t help noticing a bandage on his face. “Master Jinshi, what’s that?” she asked, straightening her collar.

“It’s nothing. A graze.” He tried to hide it with his hand. Maomao looked annoyed.

“Let me see it.”

“It’s hardly worth showing to you.”

That, of course, only made Maomao more interested. She pressed forward, leaning toward Jinshi so fast that he backed up slightly.

When she finally had him with his back to the wall, Maomao reached out slowly. For a moment, she didn’t say anything. His perfect jewel of a face now had a wound, mended with stitches, running diagonally down the right cheek. It was more than just a superficial scratch; something had torn through the flesh.

The stitches were uneven; it would be best if they were redone as soon as possible. Maomao would have liked to do it herself right then and there, but her hands were shaking with immense fatigue.

“You were in the fighting,” she said.

“I could hardly sit back and watch while others put themselves in danger, could I?”

“Why not? You’re important enough.” Her annoyance was beginning to show in her tone. “I wish you wouldn’t go running into danger. If you get yourself hurt, it will only cause trouble for everyone around you.”

He scratched his head and smiled somewhat bitterly. “Yes, I confess it was most unfair of me to do that to Basen. It’s surprising how strong Gaoshun can be when he wants to.” He began awkwardly to reattach the

bandage, but Maomao took it from him.

"I certainly didn't intend to get hurt," Jinshi said.

"Who does?"

"It's just... Someone made a most unusual request of me." He wrinkled his brow. There was sadness in his obsidian eyes. "Were you close with Loulan?"

The question seemed rather abrupt. "Relatively," Maomao said.

"Were you friends?"

"I'm not sure I know."

She really didn't. She'd thought the relationship had been something close to friendship, or at least it had felt like it to her. But as for what Loulan had thought, she couldn't say. Chatting with Xiaolan and Loulan—or rather, Shisui—hadn't been such a bad feeling.

"There were many things I didn't know about her."

"The same, it seems, was true of me." The pain on Jinshi's face intensified. "And now we've lost the chance to understand her."

Maomao took his meaning. "I see, sir."

Of course. Maomao had known it would be this way. For when Shisui had left that room, she'd entrusted something to Maomao—and then gone out knowing she was to meet her destiny. All Maomao could do was honor what had been entrusted to her...

"Master Jinshi, don't you want to rest?"

"Yes... I really am terribly tired."

His complexion was not good. Jinshi was probably in far worse shape than Maomao, even though she was the one who had been kidnapped. He had unmistakable bags under his eyes, and his lips were dry and dull.

The obvious thing would have been for him to return to his own carriage and sleep, but to Maomao's amazement, he lay down on the pelt in her own vehicle.

Maomao let her frustration show on her face. "I must ask that you not sleep here, Master Jinshi."

"Why not? I'm tired."

"Surely I shouldn't have to explain?" Maomao looked around. There were five bundles in the carriage with them—the children of the Shi clan. "This place is impure."

"I'm aware of that."

“Then why—”

Before she could finish speaking, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her close. His hand felt very cold.

They found themselves lying facing each other on the animal skin.

“Then why are you here?”

“Even I know to take pity on children,” she said, reciting the words she’d rehearsed.

“Do you? I wonder.” Still lying there, Jinshi cocked his head. “Didn’t your teacher in medicine forbid you from touching dead bodies?”

Curse him for remembering that! Maomao fought the urge to scowl openly.

“Considering he felt the need to issue such a stricture, I don’t think you would last very long in a place like this,” Jinshi said. He picked the worst times to have sharp intuition.

Maomao struggled to think of some way to escape the eyes that now studied her so intently. While she was frozen in thought, Jinshi reached out again. He turned her collar back. “And what happened to *you*?” he asked, frowning. The skin under her collar bore a dark, ugly bruise where Shenmei had hit Maomao with her fan.

Maomao was a little embarrassed, but decided it would be best to move things along promptly. “I met someone who was less than nice.”

“You were attacked,” Jinshi said, his voice icy.

“It was a woman,” Maomao made sure to add. Jinshi seemed awfully concerned about everyone else’s chastity. She flinched as he ran his fingers along the bruise.

“You don’t think there will be a scar?”

“What, from this? It’ll be gone before you know it.” Discomfited by the feeling of his fingers on her skin, she backed away, but Jinshi only reached out farther. Finally, Maomao resorted to sitting up and straightening her collar.

“Don’t go getting a scar,” Jinshi said.

“I could say the very same thing to you, sir.”

Jinshi frowned. “I’m a man. What’s it matter on me?”

“Oh, you quite surpass ‘a man.’”

“As if I cared.”

“Then I don’t care either. If one scar is enough to obliterate my value,

then so be it."

"And after you gave me such a piece of your mind." Jinshi didn't sit up, but he didn't let go of Maomao's wrist either. Some of the warmth was beginning to return to his hand. "Am I such that one scar would obliterate *my* value?" he asked, his hand tightening on her wrist. "Am I nothing more than my face?"

Maomao instinctively shook her head. "Frankly, a bit of a scar might do you good," she said, more honestly than she had meant to. Jinshi was too beautiful; he could only put those who saw him out of sorts. And those around him focused too much on his looks. Even though he wasn't as flowery and delicate as he appeared, Maomao thought; he was made of sterner stuff. In her opinion, only a small handful of people around him understood that.

"Don't you think it makes you look more manly than before?" she said. She noticed his lips tighten when she said that. He looked around uneasily, blinked, and shook his head.

"What's the matter, sir?"

Jinshi scratched the back of his neck with his free hand. "Considering the circumstances, I thought maybe I'd simply grin and bear it..."

"No need to bear anything. If you're tired, hurry up and—"

—*and get out of here and rest*, she had been about to say. But it seemed sleepiness was not what Jinshi was trying to endure. He pulled on her wrist again, and when she sat down facing him, he grabbed the upper part of her other arm.

"When I looked at your injury, I meant to act as calm as I could," he said. His unsettling face got closer and closer to hers; she could feel the heat of his breath on her skin. "I'm surprised... I mean, I think I seemed calmer than I expected."

"Huh?"

At that moment, she remembered: they'd been in a situation much like this one before, hadn't they? And hadn't it been really rather compromising? Her back was pressed to one of the carriage's support posts; she had nowhere to run.

"Master Jinshi, hadn't you better get some sleep?"

"I'm still all right."

How could he say that with those giant bags under his eyes?

"I'll re-stitch your wound, sir. Let me go get some painkillers..."

“I can live with it another half hour.”

“Another half hour, indeed!”

Jinshi ignored her. Maybe it was the fatigue that made his eyes look like a feral dog’s.

This isn’t good... She twisted and pulled, but he was stronger than she was.

Jinshi kept getting closer and closer, and when their noses were almost touching...there was a clatter.

Jinshi all but jumped into the air. “Wh—What was that?” When he realized the noise had come from where the children were resting, he looked even more stunned. That was perfect for Maomao, who shoved past him and toward the source of the sound. She felt the wrists of the swaddled children one by one.

No... No... she thought, and then she felt the wrist of the third child.

The small lips fluttered; there was an almost imperceptible hush of breath. She found a pulse, faint but detectable.

“If only these little ones were bugs, they might have been able to sleep through the winter,” Shisui had said. Those insects that made the bell-like sound—the females ate the males, and then they died too. Only their offspring survived, hibernating through the cold months.

Shisui had compared her clan to insects—and she’d given Maomao one other clue, as well.

There was another country where, sometimes, the drug was used in secret practices. It could kill a person, and then bring them back to life. It killed them with poison, but with time, the poison dissipated, and when it was completely neutralized, the dead person was revived.

Suirei had taught Maomao about the resurrection drug. Had that been part of Shisui’s plan too?

“They’re alive?” Jinshi asked from behind her, but Maomao didn’t have time to entertain his question. She was massaging the children’s bodies, desperately hoping to make the resurrection effect work. That was the whole reason Shisui had brought her here.

Maomao didn’t know what Jinshi would do with the revivified children—but she didn’t have time to explain, either herself or them. “Hot water! Master Jinshi, please, get some hot water. And something to warm them up. Clothes, food, it doesn’t matter.”

“Let the ‘dead’ lie, eh?” Jinshi chuckled. “She got me. The vixen got what she wanted.”

“Master Jinshi!” Maomao shouted. He seemed to be muttering to himself, but she didn’t have the time to care.

“Yes, of course,” he said, and she couldn’t shake the impression that there was almost a cheerful tone to his voice. His expression was much softer than earlier—though it carried some disappointment, as well.

Maomao was focused completely on the children, who were slowly starting to breathe again. When Jinshi returned with blankets and a bucket of hot water, he leaned over and whispered in her ear: “Can we continue this later?”

“Sure, whatever,” Maomao replied, too busy to think much about it. She had the little ones to worry about.

Epilogue

The capital was in an absolute uproar that day. For the Emperor had finally taken an Empress, and at the very same time, a new Crown Prince had been presented. The celebratory atmosphere, building on the anticipation of the new year that had already been brewing, even reached the pleasure district, and the young apprentice girls were beside themselves with excitement.

The Empress's name was Gyokuyou, and the Crown Prince was her son. The child had been delivered safely.

As joyous as that was, it also meant that Maomao was now without an occupation—and so we find her back in her tumbledown apothecary's shop, grinding herbs.

"Yo, Freckles, how about a snack?" A boy, young enough that his voice hadn't changed, opened the door and came in. His name was Chou-u: a brat of a kid with a dumb gap in his front teeth. They'd abandoned his old name. The fact that his new one sounded somewhat like it was a tactic of desperation, for the boy seemed to have a faint memory of what he was once called.

It was clear to see that he was still an unruly kid, but it had only been a few days earlier that he had finally been able to get up and about. He'd been in a sort of torpor until then; it was impossible to say whether it was down to his youth or simple good luck that he was able to be this active again.

Eventually, all five of the children had revived. Maomao had expended every effort to keep them breathing—including having Suirei, who had been moved elsewhere, summoned to assist with the "resurrections." She'd said the experiments hadn't been finished. No doubt she would have wished to wait until the effects of the drug were better understood before doing something like this. But circumstances had left no choice except to give the children the medicine. As a result, several of them suffered side effects.

Chou-u had been the last of the five to awaken.

These children, who would otherwise have gone to the gallows with their

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parents, were given new names and taken in by a new home. Chou-u, though, remained in the pleasure district. For better or for worse, he had lost his memory. He was also left with mild paralysis in half his body—but under the circumstances, one had to say he was lucky. For a while, it had looked as if he might not wake up at all.

No one seemed to know quite how it was that the children had survived, but in any case, they were to go to live with the former Consort Ah-Duo. Some argued that they should be sent to different places, but Ah-Duo felt that would be needlessly cruel.

Maomao was amazed when she saw the former consort: she was wearing men's clothing, for some reason, but she seemed far more alive than she ever had when she was living in the rear palace. What really startled Maomao, though, was the former consort's resemblance to Jinshi.

I did wonder. Could it be—

No, no. Let's drop that train of thought. Maomao forced the fantasy she'd once entertained out of her mind.

Ah-Duo had taken in not just the children, but Suirei as well. Yes, she had been something of a thorn in the side of the rear palace, but allowances could be made for her circumstances; and above all the fact that the former emperor's blood flowed in her veins argued in her favor. She would be watched closely, certainly, but her life would be spared.

Chou-u had been sent to the pleasure district because it was felt that, lacking his memories, it would be best if he were raised separately from the other children. Maomao thought that might be a mess in the making, but it was nothing to do with her. Or at least, it wasn't supposed to be—so what was the nasty little brat doing in her shop? They had insisted that this was really the safest place for him—but Maomao was damned if she knew how so.

The brat began to rifle through the medicine cabinet, and Maomao gave him a sound knuckle to the top of the head.

"Yowch! What'd you do that for?!"

"That is *not* for you to eat," Maomao said, snatching back from him the packet of expensive rice crackers one of her sisters had given her. Instead she tossed him a piece of brown sugar from the same drawer. That seemed to be enough to satisfy Chou-u, who walked out of the shop munching on it. There was a good-natured guard who sometimes played with him; that was

probably where he was going.

They say children are highly adaptable, and Chou-u was living proof. Instead of getting all depressed about having amnesia, he reveled in having lovely ladies to dote on him and a friendly guy to be his playmate. In fact, he hardly seemed to have any complaints at all for the moment. The old madam, meanwhile, had been well compensated for taking him in, and nothing warmed her cockles like a financial windfall. In other words, it would be a while before she felt any need to get upset at him.

Maomao lounged lazily on the floor, munching on the salty rice crackers. She folded a raggedy old cushion and put it under her head, then lay back and gazed upward.

Her old man, Luomen, wasn't going to be coming back to the pleasure district; for the time being, it had been decided that he would stay at the palace. He'd been banished—on dubious grounds, yes—but he was a man of consummate talent. No doubt the Emperor was loath to let him go.

And why was Maomao here, instead of serving Jinshi again? There was a reason for that too.

Seki-u had visited Maomao at one point. (Although she'd known Maomao was an apothecary, she'd been surprised to discover that the pleasure district was her base of operations.) "I wasn't going to be able to sleep if I didn't at least get these to you," she said, and gave Maomao two letters written on crude paper. The name of the sender was one they had practiced again and again, writing in the dirt: they were from Xiaolan.

Xiaolan was pretty lonely, Seki-u informed her, what with how Maomao and Shisui had both disappeared at the same time. Apparently, the public story was that both of them had been dismissed from the rear palace.

"She was really down about it," Seki-u said. "You could have at least said goodbye to her." She went on to describe how Xiaolan was doing in rather detailed terms; Maomao started to sense that, unable to leave Xiaolan completely alone, Seki-u had taken up the mantle of being her friend. "There's not that much work she can do, but being cheerful like she is goes a long way."

Xiaolan hadn't been able to get herself retained at the rear palace, but one of the lower consorts had taken a liking to her, and had written her a letter of introduction; she was now a serving woman to the consort's younger sister at their family home. Maomao didn't doubt that the charming Xiaolan would

soon be fully integrated into the household.

One of the letters was addressed to Maomao, but the other was for Shisui. Maomao opened the one addressed to her. The penmanship left something to be desired, clearly the work of someone still learning her characters, but the effort she had put into this note describing her current situation was evident. There were mistakes and revisions in a few places, but paper was still too luxurious a resource for Xiaolan to rewrite the letter afresh; instead, she simply blotted out the errors.

At the very end, she had written: *"I hope I get to see you again sometime. I want more ice cream!"*

As for the letter for Shisui, Maomao took it, but didn't open it. She suspected, though, that whatever else it said, that last line was probably the same.

She felt something warm roll gently down her cheek. *Ploop*, it went, falling onto the paper and distorting the characters.

They hadn't found Shisui's body. She'd been shot with a feifa and then fallen off the stronghold roof, yet no matter how they pawed through the snowbanks below, they came up with nothing. They said they would look for the body again when the snow melted in spring. Maomao, for one, hoped they never found it.

I'll have to go find more medicinal ingredients.

Maomao had her work cut out for her in the pleasure district, probably far more so than she ever had in the palace. Her old man had made a supply of medicines before he left, but that was long gone, and she suspected the fields were dead by now too.

She hadn't seen Jinshi since they'd left the Shi stronghold. Even if she'd wanted to, he wasn't exactly the kind of person you could waltz up and ask for a meeting with.

There was no way a man who had taken command of an army—and had the scar on his face to prove it—could continue pretending to be a eunuch in the rear palace. Jinshi must have finally gone back to being whoever he really was. Maomao didn't know his real name; she couldn't have used it even if she did. The worlds they lived in were simply too different.

As for his injury, there were plenty of perfectly competent doctors around; he didn't need Maomao. Hell, her old man was there at the palace. Maomao

couldn't have done anything to help even if she'd been present.

Anyway, now that Jinshi was no longer a eunuch, he couldn't get away with keeping some lowborn girl around him. He wouldn't have to sneak and spy anymore, anyway. So it was best, really, that Maomao had come back to the apothecary's shop in the pleasure district. At least with her father no longer there, the madam would probably stop trying to sell her off.

Ugh... So tired...

She'd been up all night the night before making medicines. Creating new drugs was a challenging endeavor. You could mix several ingredients trying to increase the potency of an effect, but sometimes you accidentally ended up with a poison instead. She'd made several new wounds on her left arm to test some of them out, but she just couldn't quite get the outcome she wanted. She'd even tried rubbing some of her concoction onto the wound on her ear (why let it go to waste, after all?), but it didn't tell her much. After all these years, she seemed to have developed a pretty high tolerance for pain.

Got to cut deeper if I want to be sure. Maomao looked at her left hand, then tied some string firmly around her pinky. She stood and took a small knife from a cabinet. *Here goes!*

Just as she was about to bring the knife down, a beautiful voice interrupted her: "*What* are you doing?"

Without a word, she turned to see a man in an unusual mask standing in the entryway of the shop. Behind him were a familiar, middle-aged man who looked distinctly overworked, and the madam, rubbing her hands and offering them an ingratiating smile.

"Done with all your work?" Maomao asked, undoing the string around her finger and putting the knife back in the cabinet.

"Isn't a person entitled to a break every once in a while?"

The madam poured tea and said, "Please, relax," still wearing that smile. The drink was made from her best white tea leaves, and was accompanied by small pieces of finely sculpted sugar—the sort of expensive accommodations usually reserved for the Three Princesses' guests. "Are you quite sure this is a suitable meeting place, sir?" she inquired, although for some reason she was asking Gaoshun. He nodded, and the old lady, looking slightly disappointed, backed out and closed the door with another "Relax. Take your time."

What's going on here? Maomao wondered.

Jinshi finally removed his mask, revealing his face, like a perfect jewel—

except for the scar that ran down one cheek. Maomao gave the folded cushion a smack to straighten it out and set it in front of Jinshi, who sat down promptly and without undue grace.

"I'm sure you've been working hard, sir," Maomao said, next placing the tea and snacks before Jinshi.

He took a sip of the drink. "I won't pretend it's been easy. Dealing with personnel has been a nightmare, and on top of that there's the issue of the Shi clan's territory to contend with." He let out a long sigh, his brow furrowing. Was it just Maomao's imagination, or was Gaoshun rubbing off on him?

She had heard that the members of the Shi clan had already been executed —most of them had been at the stronghold, anyway. Their territory would be put under government control, and with the richness of the timber resources in the north, it could be expected to produce a handsome addition to the nation's coffers. Without the Shi clan serving as middleman, they could lower the tax rate in the area and still make plenty of profit. And there were so many things one could do with timber.

I hope they turn it into paper. Maomao smiled, hoping they had the right kind of trees up north to make decent sheets. She was just thinking how the country's failure to start up a paper industry to this point had probably been due to the Shi clan's interference when she realized she was grinding medicine in a mortar.

"Don't pretend I'm not here," Jinshi said.

"Sorry, sir. Old habit."

"Never mind. Don't worry about it." Jinshi took a bite of the snacks and drank down the rest of his tea. When Maomao got up to make more, she found Jinshi grabbing her wrist.

"Yes, sir? What is it?"

He tugged, obliging her to sit back down. He was studying the side of her face most intensely, gazing at her ear. She was fairly sure the bruise from where she'd been struck was gone by now.

He smells...sweet. It wasn't the smell of the snacks, but of his perfume. Suiren always did have good taste, Maomao reflected, an image of the slightly mischievous serving woman flashing through her mind.

"Perhaps it's time I asked you to make good on your promise," Jinshi said.

Promise? Maomao looked at the ceiling, trying to recall, and Jinshi

scowled.

"You can't pretend you've forgotten. I got you the ingredients for your ice cream, didn't I?"

Oh! Geez! That! She almost clapped her hands as she remembered. But then her gaze returned to the ceiling as the exact nature of that promise came back to her.

"What is it?"

"Oh, er, nothing. It's about—ahem—your hair stick." Maomao's voice grew so quiet it almost disappeared. "I, uh...gave it to somebody."

Jinshi didn't say anything, but his face grew tight—less, it seemed, from anger than from disappointment. Maomao knew this was bad; she struggled to think of some way of placating him. "But they might find it in spring!"

"Why would that be?"

"Well, and then again...they might not." It was better if they didn't. For if they didn't find it... "It might make its way back to one of the shops in the capital eventually."

"You *sold* it?!"

"No, sir, I didn't!" Hmm. This was proving tricky. What should she say? "I gave it to Shisui...I mean, to Loulan. I *did* tell her to give it back someday."

"So that's what you're talking about," Jinshi said, and then he looked squarely at her. "In that case, perhaps I'll ask you to fulfill your other promise."

Other promise. Other promise. Ah!

"You mean to listen when someone is talking to me?"

"That's the one," Jinshi said, pleased.

Maomao faced Jinshi and adopted a formal sitting position. "All right then, sir. Go ahead." But Jinshi didn't say anything.

"Go ahead," Maomao repeated. Still he didn't speak, but only gazed at her. "Didn't you have anything to say?"

"I did, yes. But on reflection, I'm sure you already know the thing I was about to tell you." He was probably alluding to the matter of his real position, but Maomao was already aware of it. There would be no point in his telling her about it now.

"Something else, then?" she suggested.

"Something else..." Jinshi began, but then he said nothing further. Neither

of them spoke, the silence stretching on.

What, he didn't have anything to say after all? Maomao thought. She was about to get up, eager to get back to work on her medicines, when suddenly Jinshi was coming closer, then wrapping himself around her neck.

"May I ask, sir, what exactly you're doing?"

She felt something damp and warm brush her neck—no, surround it. She felt teeth; she realized she was being sweetly, gently bitten.

"Do you know what it means now?" Jinshi asked.

"Well, human saliva can be toxic." Just as a bite from a wild animal had to be carefully disinfected lest it fester, the same precautions had to be taken with a bite from a person.

Jinshi said absolutely nothing.

"I'd like to get back to my work, sir."

"I know it takes more than a little toxin to bother you."

He bit harder. It started to hurt a little, and she smacked him on the back. He only bit down harder still, and before she could stop herself Maomao pounded him soundly on the shoulders. Finally she felt his lips move away from her neck. A string of saliva stretched between them for a good *shaku* before it finally snapped.

"What, are you going to bite me to death?"

"I've wanted to at times."

Maomao was just wondering what was with this man when she found him embracing her.

Jinshi smirked. "Now, where were we?"

Up close, she saw the stitches hadn't come out of his cheek yet, although they were neater than they had been before, suggesting they'd been redone. *Wonder if that's my old man's handiwork*, she thought. She found herself reaching toward Jinshi's face. His eyes softened in a smile, looking somehow innocent.

"And are you poisonous as well?" Jinshi was just reaching out for Maomao's chin when:

"Freckles!" There was a crash as the window across from the entrance, where customers could pick up medicines, was thrown open. "Check this out! I know you wanted one of these!" There was Chou-u, looking terribly pleased with himself. He was holding a lizard above his head.

"Ooh! You got one!" Maomao slipped past Jinshi, whose head drooped

dejectedly, and grabbed the lizard, depositing it directly into a jar.

"Huh? What's that guy doing on the floor?"

"He's very tired from work. Here, your reward." Maomao gave him a chunk of brown sugar. Chou-u went running off again.

From the floor, Jinshi could be heard to growl, "Knew I should've sent him to the gallows..." He sounded like a feral dog indeed. Maybe it was the scar on his cheek that made Jinshi seem less androgynous than before; it was as if he were drawn in bolder lines now.

Maomao realized she could see a tiny crack in the door, and an eyeball peering through it. She opened the door noisily, discovering a very startled old madam and Gaoshun.

"Grams, get a bedroom ready. Pick an incense that promotes sleep."

"Yeah, sure," the old lady said with a disappointed click of her tongue.

As the old woman left, Maomao looked back at Jinshi, still lying on the ground. "You seem most fatigued, Master Jinshi," she said. He only stared at her vacantly. "I think you had better rest."

"Yes, fine. I'll do that."

That'll be for the best, Maomao thought—but Jinshi didn't move.

"Master Jinshi?" She crouched down and shook his shoulders. *Huh*, she thought, *actually, maybe I can just call him Jinshi now.*

While she was thinking it over, though, Jinshi said, "This will be my pillow"—and put his head smack on Maomao's knees. The crown of his head was pressed up into her stomach, and his arms were wrapped around her back.

"Master Jinshi..."

He didn't say anything. Was he asleep, or just pretending?

The madam quietly placed a fine cushion and some incense in a corner of the room, then showed herself out. Maomao sighed, then reached for her pestle. The smell of the medicine she was crushing mingled with the incense, and the sound of the pestle working was accompanied by Jinshi's even breathing.

My legs are going to fall asleep, Maomao thought, as she began working on a new medicine.

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Days after the start of the new year, the man still hadn't had time to rest. There had been some sort of commotion in the capital, but here in this distant port town, whatever it was seemed unimportant—no skin off *his* nose. What really mattered to this man was selling his wares while the festive atmosphere lasted. During a celebration, men wanted to show their best side to their women. Every merchant knew that, and every merchant took advantage of it.

This man's open-air stall had everything from rings that looked like children's toys to fancy imported necklaces. It was a motley collection of goods, but it suited a moment when the firecrackers were going off.

"Thanks for your business!"

Ah, another sale. Another man with no eye for value. This customer was walking away with a pair of earrings that would have embarrassed a child playing dress-up. He was going to go back to his village and give them to his beloved, he said, but when she saw what passed for his taste, he would be lucky to get anything but a scornful laugh.

Still, the merchant was, well, a merchant, and it was his job to talk up the merchandise—even the crappy stuff. Convince the customer that it was worth parting with his hard-earned coins.

The merchant's most recent customer was practically skipping away when a young woman appeared at the shop, someone he didn't recognize. A lookie-loo if he'd ever seen one. Her outfit was scruffy and a little dirty. The clothing was made of good stuff, though, in a style they favored far to the north of here.

He was just about to shoo her away, lest she interfere with his next transaction, when she looked up at him. "Hey, mister, is this a cicada?"

"Ah, yes. Made from jewels in ancient times." He hadn't meant to simply answer her question—the girl's looks, which were far more refined than her clothes, must have thrown him for a loop. There was a vestige of some innocence in her expression, but her body was clearly that of a grown woman.

"Huh, that's neat! Jewels, huh?" She jabbed the jeweled bug with her finger.

"Hey, I'm trying to sell that! If you're not going to buy it, then don't

touch!" The cicada wasn't delicate, but he wasn't about to let her put her grimy fingers all over it. After a moment he said, "*Are* you going to buy it?"

"Hmm... I don't have much money..."

"Then forget it, kid." It didn't matter how pretty she was. You had to draw the line somewhere.

The cicada must have really captured the young woman's attention, for she couldn't seem to take her eyes off it. He wondered how she'd react if he told her it had supposedly been made to be placed in the mouth of a dead person. Yeah, that would probably spook her enough to get her to go somewhere else. He was about to inform her of the fact, when:

"Here." The young woman took a hair stick from the folds of her robe.

"What's this?"

"Payment in kind. You want it?"

"Hmmm..." The man squinted at her and took it. Whatever this hair stick was, it wasn't likely to be worth much. Then again, its beauty and fine craftsmanship showed that it was not the sort of thing one would find at the average jewelry shop. There was some damage to one part of it—that was a shame; it would bring the price down significantly. But that was the only flaw. It was strange—the flat part of the hair stick showed a trace as if it had been bored through. Almost like there was something round stuck inside.

"How about it?"

"Sure, this'll do just fine."

The merchant considered asking where it had come from, just in case, but he thought better of it. No, he should simply thank his lucky stars to have come into possession of such a thing. The crest on this hair stick was superb in and of itself. He could use the patterned base and replace the decoration with something else, and it would still sell for a pretty sum.

"I'll take this, then!" The young woman held the jeweled cicada up to the sun, making it gleam, and laughed. Her guileless smile made even her grimy outfit seem to shine. The merchant thought of the Emperor's garden of flowers, the rear palace—this young woman must have been the sort of blossom that bloomed there.

Drawn in by her smile, the man found himself talking to her before he could stop himself. "A pretty thing like you—if you were to be part of the Emperor's flower garden, you could have all the luxuries you wanted. You know, His Majesty's favorite consort—what was her name? Err..."

“You mean Consort Gyokuyou?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. They said she’s the Empress now.”

Sometimes the bookseller sold pictures of her. Too expensive for commoners to afford, but they served nicely to draw in customers.

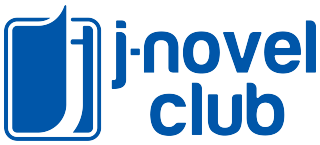
“Oh, Gyokuyou...” The young woman, with one eye still on her prize, looked around until she spotted something: a fisherman separating out the fish and the seaweed from his net. “Say, mister. My name—it’s Tamamo.”

“Tamamo? That’s a fancy word for seaweed, right? Sounds like a name fit for the blessing of the ocean.”

“I know, right? I’m really curious what’s across the sea.”

The girl called Tamamo grinned and looked at a boat docked at the port, a ship that had come all the way from a far island country. Several of the trade goods it had brought had even made their way to this very stall.

The girl hopped into the air and smiled brightly. “Okay, thanks. Bye!” She waved gaily to the merchant and ran off toward the dock.



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